

# Dave Hickey Now

Julia Friedman

Daniel Oppenheimer, *Far From Respectable: Dave Hickey and His Art*. University of Texas Press, 152pp., \$25 cloth.

**R**OLAND BARTHES' 1979 *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* introduced into art theory the opposition between 'studium' and 'punctum'—the two facets, according to Barthes, that are necessary for a photograph to be effective. *Studium*—an “application to a thing ... a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment ... but without special acuity” correlates with an interest in content, the thing that compels the viewer to look at a photograph closely. It is “of the order of *liking*, not of *loving*.” *Punctum*, by contrast, is at once an irrelevant detail, outside of the image's narrative purpose, and a poignant feature that metaphorically “pricks” and “bruises” the viewer. *Punctum* is already in the image, and in an effective photograph a bespoke association triggers it. Barthes' *studium/punctum* dichotomy came to mind as I read, and then reread, Daniel Oppenheimer's book about Dave Hickey. Because I know Dave personally, and collaborated with him professionally a few years ago, I was already all set in the *studium* department. So on my first reading of the text in May 2020, still in its manuscript form, I concentrated almost solely on the descriptions of Dave the writer and Dave the person—particularly the bits that were new

to me, either because I lacked the writerly insights of the author, or because I was unfamiliar with the facts revealed in Oppenheimer's extensive research. At the time, the book struck me as thought-provoking, yet slightly solipsistic. Much like *Camera Lucida*, which Geoff Dyer astutely described as “a mediated portrait of the workings of his [Barthes'] own mind,” *Far From Respectable: Dave Hickey and his Art*, read as a mediated portrait of its author's mind. It was a book about Dave, but it was also a book about Daniel.

It took me another year and a half to get to the *punctum*. Initially, Hickey's warnings about the danger posed to art by the “therapeutic institutions” (museums, art schools, and fund-granting bodies) laid out in his now-canonical 1993 volume *The Invisible Dragon*, and elucidated in Oppenheimer's masterful argument, seemed to me exaggerated. I was at a loss to explain why, while Hickey's brilliant writings about Ed Ruscha, Joan Mitchell, Bridget Riley, Ken Price, and Lynda Benglis were barely mentioned, an entire chapter had been devoted to an ideological squabble prompted by a museum show he did not even write about. All that changed, however, as a swell of ideology suddenly shifted the attention of the art world from object to virtue. As high-profile police killings became the inflection point of America's racial reckoning over the summer of 2020, Black trauma was no longer one of many subtexts, but the focal topic

whenever references to race were involved. In the ensuing months public and private museums, art schools and art publications scrambled to prove their *bona fides* in anti-racism, implementing an array of DEI initiatives. The operating assumption was that the prevailing meritocratic order is, in both theory and practice, systemically racist. The solution was to shift towards identity-based privileging of URMS (underrepresented minorities). Reinforced by Twitter, the virtue-oriented ethos took hold, and Hickey's prediction about the "puritanical intellectuals and activists [...] regulat[ing] culture in the name of justice, equity, and identity" has been transformed from a theoretical probability into a palpable reality. The *punctum* of *Far From Respectable*, which according to Barthes, was "already there," has now fully revealed itself.

As I reread the text in book form, in September of 2021, its *punctum* pricked and bruised me with the realization that Hickey was spot-on in his warnings on the pages of *The Invisible Dragon*, and that Oppenheimer was wise to highlight the standoff between the artists who prioritize beauty and the institutions that prioritize virtue. My bad. Now I was certain that the author's opening question of whether Hickey is "particularly relevant right now" can only be answered with a resounding affirmative. Hickey's forecast that art will be threatened and suppressed by "the new puritans," who will no longer come from the conservative Christian right but from the progressive left, has been resoundingly vindicated. When the administration of major museums declare that they will use exhibitions as vehicles for "the powerful message of social and racial justice," (as in the Philip Guston case I discuss below), and when a respected *New York Times* art critic suggests that "art from the distant past [should be] viewed through the lens of the political present," as he welcomes the moral scrutiny of "#MeToo evaluation" applied to Titian's "repeated images of

gender-based power plays and exposed female flesh," it is fair to say that Hickey's dream of cosmopolitan paganism is dead. And while the motivation of "the new puritans" from the left might be well-intentioned, the result, in Hickey's own paraphrasing of Michel Foucault is bondage, and the loss of creative freedom. Care is control, as Dave likes to say.

## **Oppenheimer was wise to highlight the standoff between the artists who prioritize beauty and the institutions that prioritize virtue.**

Oppenheimer is the first writer to dedicate an entire book to Dave Hickey, who is now in his early eighties. Although Hickey made occasional public appearances in the 1970s and the 1980s (most notably as a smartly dressed and inexorably clever member of the 1975 panel on William Buckley Jr.'s *Firing Line* with Tom Wolfe), he came into real prominence in the mid-1990s, with the publication of *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (Art Issues Press, Los Angeles: 1993) and *Air Guitar: Essays on Art and Democracy* (Art Issues Press, Los Angeles: 1997). Invitations to speak at various art institutions began to pour in, and Hickey delivered dozens of intrepid lectures in which he dazzled audiences with knowledge and wit, while mocking the academic and museum bureaucrats who paid his honoraria. In 2001 he was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship, also known as the Genius Grant, and in 2006 Hickey won a Peabody Award for his work in the *American Masters* series documentary about Andy Warhol. The College Art Association honored him with the Frank Jewett Mather Award for art criticism in 1994.

His decades-long writing career has included essays on art, music and culture in *Rolling Stone*, *Art News*, *Artforum*, the *London Review of Books*, and *Art in America*, where he also served as an executive editor.

In 2012 a revised and expanded version of *The Invisible Dragon* was published by The University of Chicago Press, which also printed *25 Women: Essays on Their Art* in 2016, and *Perfect Wave: More Essays on Art and Democracy* in 2017. In 2014, *Pirates and Farmers* (Riding Press, London) hit the shelves, sending Twitter into overdrive. There is even a collection of short stories, written in the 1960s and issued in 1989 as *Prior Convictions* (SMU Press, Dallas). As Hickey's fame grew, and his readership expanded, a new generation of art students fell under the spell of his artful prose. But he also made enemies along the way and, by the time *Pirates and Farmers* was published, his detractors were burrowing into his frequent infractions of the tightening PC codes.

In his book, Oppenheimer sets out to bring the spotlight back on Hickey's serious writing. Penetrating the ruse of his subject's impish provocations, and fully understanding the power of critical thought, Oppenheimer builds a solid argument for revisiting Hickey's books—not only because they contain some of the best-ever Anglophone writing on art, but also because we badly need Hickey's evaluation of the 1990s to help us survive the culture of the 2020s.

*Far From Respectable* pays overt stylistic homage to Hickey's irrepressible, idiosyncratic prose. It is not an exhaustive analysis of Hickey's oeuvre, but an argument for his contemporary relevance. It is not a comprehensive biography along the lines of Benjamin Moser's recent monograph on Susan Sontag; yet Oppenheimer provides enough biographical and psychological background to contextualize Hickey's ideas.

The book consists of only four chapters, like *The Invisible Dragon*, and following Hickey's example, Oppenheimer makes his points in a spare, rhetorical style. His introduction tells the story of Hickey's unrealized book project *Pagan America*—a country of a “large, secular, commercial democracy,” united by shared icons across cultural strata. Hickey is said to have lost the manuscript, so he has never shared his aspirational vision, but if he had, he would have been proven wrong. The art community of the “pagan” celebrated by Hickey has, as Oppenheimer put it, been “colonized by the virtue-promoting institutions”—a trend that has only gathered pace since the summer of 2020. Unlike the culture wars of the 1990s, the new puritans came from the ideological left, but their orthodoxy was equally stifling. Hickey understands the danger they posed, as he laments the art establishment's consistent moral cowardice. The first chapter of Oppenheimer's book describes the infamous 1989 cancellation of the exhibition *Robert Mapplethorpe: The Perfect Moment* by the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington DC—a preemptive, cowardly maneuver meant to thwart an anticipated Christian conservative backlash.

It is impossible not to connect this decades-old event with a more recent, similarly cowardly maneuver by another respected Washington institution: the National Gallery of Art. In September of 2020, the NGA shared a joint “Statement from the Directors” of the four venues for the long-awaited retrospective “Philip Guston Now” that was to originate at the National Gallery, delaying the traveling show by a whopping four years in order to “bring in additional perspectives and voices.” The purported goal was to mitigate the damage from potential accusations that some of the paintings in the show might implicate the artist as a racist, because they contained visual references to the Ku Klux Klan. Even though

the exhibition's catalogue contained plentiful proof of Guston's anti-racist stance (including a Black contributor to the catalogue referring to Guston's paintings as "woke"), the administration argued that it was the potential *impact* on the viewers, and not the artist's *intention*, that mattered. Following a considerable pushback from artists, critics and curators, the date of postponement was moved back. But the damage has been done: the framing of the show had shifted from art to virtue.

Who was behind the postponement? Art bureaucrats from the therapeutic institutions. As Oppenheimer tells the story of the Mapplethorpe exhibition debacle, he simultaneously lays out Hickey's aesthetic cosmology, in which "the messy democratic marketplace, which was the proper incubator of the artistic value in our society" is under attack from "the villains," "the blob of curators, academics, review boards, arts organizations, governmental agencies, museum boards, and funding institutions that had claimed for themselves almost total control of the assignment and negotiation of value to art." Hickey famously declared: "I characterize this cloud of bureaucracies generally, as the 'therapeutic institution.'" Their aim is to elevate virtue (as they understand it), not to promote beauty. Motivated by power and control, and the "fear of freedom and pleasure and undisciplined feeling," these therapeutic institutions, according to Hickey, espouse "the puritanical canon of visual appeal." They are the new church militant, poised to accuse and to condemn anything that might be deemed at odds with the reigning orthodoxy.

Hickey, on the other hand, worships not virtue, but beauty, which the "bad boy of art criticism," as he is often introduced, revealed through provocation. His currency is "beautiful provocations," a term he used to describe Mapplethorpe's work as it was attacked by the illiberal right in the 1990s. An

Now, Titian's "beautiful provocations" are under attack from the illiberal left, as the *New York Times* review cited above demonstrates. Oppenheimer, a writer himself, is open about his enchantment by Dave Hickey's art. He argues that Hickey's remarkable impact as an essayist was not due to the fact "his theory of beauty was superior," but that it was "because his performance while articulating it was so beautiful." For Oppenheimer, *The Invisible Dragon* is "seeded with so many small bombs of insight and elegance, so much wit, and so many dazzling connections, the text became a work of art in itself." In a sense, Hickey performs what he preaches.

Oppenheimer's second chapter examines Hickey through the eyes of his friends, colleagues, and family members. Their testimonials are loving without being hagiographic, and their memories of the young Dave provide an excellent addendum to Hickey's own fictionalized recollections, familiar to readers of the autobiographical writings from *Air Guitar* (1997) and *Perfect Wave* (2017). Hickey certainly does not suffer fools gladly, but he is unanimously described as forgiving, supportive and gentle, sometimes to a fault, by his friends and former partners. The chapter's title, "The semi-transitional epiphany tactic," is a witty riff on what Oppenheimer identifies as his subject's lack of planning, and "certain tendencies to depression and self-sabotage," combined with "a talent for writing, a daimonic intellect, and intuition for where certain kinds of cultural energy were coalescing." This personal context matters because it underscores Hickey's innate caring, authenticity, and utter lack of interest in being a part of anything resembling a bureaucratic hierarchy. In practical terms, this gonzo attitude was manifested in what could be interpreted as career setbacks: his unfinished graduate studies, his forsaken gallery directorship, the editorial and academic positions that are conspicuous by their absence from his

resume, and ultimately his well-publicized 2012 “retirement” from the art world. Hickey is fallible enough, but he is indisputably a man of integrity: an endangered species threatened with extinction in the prissy and self-righteous art world of the twenty-first century.

The third chapter of *Far From Respectable* looks back at an incident that, in retrospect, was a premonitory tremor of the earthquake presently rocking the art world to its foundations. The events in question were set in motion by the 1996 exhibition “Sexual Politics: Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party in Feminist Art History,” curated by Amelia Jones for the .2”# Hammer Museum. The Hammer exhibition proved to be a telling antecedent of today’s battles over identity art. In his review of the show, the *LA Times* art critic Christopher Knight blasted Jones for subordinating the art to the curatorial agenda: “Lengthy object-labels and preachy didactic panels direct the audience in proper theoretical viewing of the art. With a curator who is an ideologist, theory is privileged over practice. Art is thus misused, its eocacy undermined by curatorial trivialization.”

Libby Lumpkin’s review in *Art Issues* was similarly damning, pointing to the heavy-handed ideological spin, referring to the show as “kitsch, nothing more and nothing other, a blatant, popular artifact rendered ludicrous by its higher aspirations.” Like Knight, she criticized the reduction of art to a mere prop in the political *agitprop* of “Sexual Politics.” Oppenheimer’s summation of Lumpkin’s scathing review is spot on: “If art is just reduced to politics of theory or therapy by other means, who really cared? Why not do a protest or a seminar or a healing circle instead?” Hickey himself did not opine on the exhibition in print, but his past essays on beauty, combined with his personal associations—Knight was his good friend, and Lumpkin his wife—placed him in the middle of Jones’ crosshairs.

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Her rebuttal “Every man knows where and how beauty gives him pleasure’: Beauty Discourse and the Logic of Aesthetics,” came three years later in Los-Angeles-based critical discourse quarterly *X-Tra*. Jones argued that the culture wars of the 1990s were not about artists and art lovers fighting against Christian conservatives. Instead, as Oppenheimer explains, the wars were fought between “those like Jones who believed that leftist politics and critical theory were essential tools in deconstructing and demystifying old ideas of beauty and taste” and “the beauty brigade, the defenders of those hoary old concepts and their thinly veiled retrograde politics.” Dave Hickey, as the author of “the single most influential art book of the decade,” was the main target of Jones’ essay, as she insisted that the discourse of beauty is never innocent, but always involves taking inherently ideological positions.

As Oppenheimer notes: “[F]or Jones, Hickey was much worse than his beauty-loving white male forebears like Immanuel Kant and Ruskin [because] Hickey was trying to reassert the primacy of beauty in the political context in which its reactionary implications were already visible.” Despite the obvious pertinence of such observations,



I must disagree with Oppenheimer's vision that Amelia Jones "mischaracterized Hickey's writing." Her view of Hickey's subtle and complex arguments as "straightforward declarations of the universality and immutability of beauty" is less of an issue than her casting of Hickey as an ideological enemy. Oppenheimer is right to point to the anger Jones exhibited toward Hickey—a resentment that seems illogical considering the lack of direct contact between the two.

Their rift was about more than misaligned ideologies. Rather, it was about the degree to which ideology figures into the creation of art. Hickey's proposition that "works of art [might be] considered frivolous objects or entities with no intrinsic value," was heresy in a world where art is nothing but a tool for social struggle against Western patriarchy. In Oppenheimer's words, Hickey "was skeptical of interpretations that leaned too heavily on straightforwardly political or economic explanations for why people were or weren't likely to invest in a given work." A man for whom art is autonomous and "intrinsically ineffable" is virtually the opposite of Jones who, according to Oppenheimer, "was clear about her debt to Marxist and feminist thinking." She sought "an ethically responsible path forward for artists and art lovers who didn't want to continue to be complicit in the oppressive habits of Western art." For instance, writing about Renee Cox's photograph *Yo Mama*, Jones employed the now tiresomely familiar trope of self-demotion as a white woman: "In my sometimes pain at being white, with the negative responsibilities this entails in Western patriarchy, and experiencing the inevitable privilege that my 'visible' bodily appearance assigns me in this culture, I want to *be this someone else*." Within this politicized framework, ideology supplants aesthetics.

The power of *The Invisible Dragon*, according to Oppenheimer, is rooted in "its attacks on the art critical and curatorial establishment at a time when it was exerting an immense and often stifling influence on the teaching and practice of art." Hickey's rhetoric is protean in its register. He can be a populist, "a champion of the common viewer's instincts and preferences against the dry philosophizing of elite academics and uptight bureaucrats," but he can also attack "as a highbrow, dancing circles of French theory around the middlebrow moralizing of art bureaucrats." What makes Hickey's writings so dangerous, so "rhetorically devastating" to the moralizing of art bureaucrats is that "his true field was not aesthetics, but the sociology or politics of beauty." He always has a bigger picture in mind.

This bigger picture is the reason why *Far From Respectable* is so timely, and why we need to reread Hickey now. As Oppenheimer explains:

*By 2020... it was clear that the orthodoxies and tendencies that Hickey was resisting back in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when they existed in their concentrated form in academia and the art world, hadn't so much evaporated as percolated down to the groundwater of American culture, welling up from there to infuse whole new realms of cultural and political life, rendering more legible than ever what was most dissident in his writing. It had not lost the dialectical charge he feared it would, though the landscape of contestation had spread out and diffused. The therapeutic institution, the blob, was everywhere and everything, issuing judgements at a million miles a second on Twitter.*

What Hickey offers us is exactly what we need: a way to shift the focus from meta-issues, like ideology, back to the art objects themselves. In Kantian terms, we must abandon the "thing for us" and return to the "thing in itself." *Air Guitar* contained a brilliant meme of the authoritarians as

“Aryan muscle boys,” a type of conformist and orthodox actor who suppresses and dominates “what was wild and seductive and subversive in art.” Oppenheimer underscores that for Hickey “the aryan muscle-boys weren’t just actual aryan muscle-boys; they were all the puritans and schoolmarms, of whatever color, ideology, and affiliation, who think art isn’t just subordinate to ethics but a practical branch of it.” Today, “the descendants of the aryan muscle-boys” are not “just uptight political conservatives,” but also “politically correct professors and curators, well-meaning activists and art teachers, right thinking bureaucrats and philanthropists.” Amelia Jones, who was ahead of her time in the late 1990s, falls neatly into that category.

Perhaps more important than his diagnosis of the malaise of puritanical orthodoxy, Hickey’s writings also contain a prescription for treatment. By identifying “what kind of art is not the answer”— “[not] anything that is made by aryan muscle-boys of the right, [...] not be work born of the mirrored galleries of the aryan muscle-boy left, with its infinitely reflecting visions of carefully pruned souls endlessly watching and reproaching and correcting each other,” Oppenheimer, paraphrasing Hickey, points out an obvious fact that has somehow escaped the puritanical commissariat of left-wing culture: “Whatever justice is made of ...art is not downstream from it. It is not an extension, distraction, evasion, or even .... a compliment to justice. It is a rival source of value in the world.”

Hickey’s ideas about a healthy art ecosystem offer a blueprint for resolving today’s tensions. His vision of art extending outwards into the world of popular culture,

based on “binding people together in sympathetic orientation around the work they love,” is a way to halt runaway Balkanization and imposed orthodoxy. Hickey’s nonjudgmental attitude is necessary to help us avoid sacrificing art to institutional commitments, and sacrificing beauty to virtue. Hickey, “a grantor of permission and forgiveness, a purveyor of caring, knowing acceptance, and encouragement” is the perfect symbolic father for this movement away from intolerance. The “earnestness and vulnerability” of his writings, is the opposite of critical theory’s caustic cynicism.

*Far From Respectable* makes an excellent case for reading Dave Hickey again. The corrosive model which prioritizes virtue over art has been failing us for at least three decades by suppressing heterodox artists. The only winner in this unfortunate experiment, in which art is assumed to be downstream from justice, is the art market. Its explosive growth over the same period of thirty or so years, correlates precisely with the growth of the therapeutic institutions. As the quest for righteousness shrunk the space formerly taken up by aesthetics, rampant financial speculation and insider trading moved in to fill the vacuum. Oppenheimer’s book is more than an homage to Hickey. It is also a reminder that the imperative of virtue-signaling is fundamentally at odds with “the cultivation and flourishing of eccentric, subversive impulses that [have] the potential to remake the whole society from the outside in.” Hickey’s writings remind us why we might want to participate in an earnest and vulnerable art world, in which outsiders can still bond over beauty. A