

Faithful Servant

Stuart Morgan, *What the Butler Saw. Selected Writings by Stuart Morgan*, edited by Ian Hunt, Durian Publications Ltd, London 1996, £13.95, ISBN 0-9527414-0-7

A book of occasional critical writings, especially one which has no unifying plan or point of view, may be read for a variety of reasons: for opinions of the artists discussed, out of admiration for the critic's mental gyrations, but also—and perhaps most usefully—as a guide to the writing of criticism. In this last guise, Stuart Morgan's *What the Butler Saw* is a veritable Oxford English Dictionary of critical technique. Here then are just some of the guiding principles which a budding and ambitious critic may draw from this distinguished volume, illustrated with examples taken from its pages.

1. Inconsistency is a virtue; pursue relativism but at the same time write about the human condition. 'The prerogative, even the duty, of critics is to change tactic or allegiance or orientation...'
2. Divert your reader, tirelessly recount anecdotes (Morgan quotes Sammy Davis Jnr. imploring an audience, 'I have been trying to entertain you for fifty years').
3. Be mysterious. Of Dennis Oppenheim: 'There is only translation, metaphor, faith in coherence, a slow dance around a vacant centre.' Frequently make unsupported literary and quasi-philosophical statements: 'Innocence and honesty and laughter are our stays against confusion and we need them badly.'
4. Become a seer. Discover the presence of God secreted in art—if you really push the matter, even in the paintings of Steven Campbell. Concepts of which art-world people usually know nothing (like chaos theory) can add kudos to your musings. Write of eras passing, and of great transformations in vaguely millenarian prophecy.
5. Garnish your writing with Theory—which, as everyone knows, is a single, coherent thing. There are two basic methods here: in the first, heavy critical apparatus is brought to bear on sentences which seem meaningful when read quickly but defend themselves from analysis with fierce, rebarbative jargon. In the second (and this is Morgan's preferred choice), the portentous deployment of references is offset with a light touch. From Lukács to Borges, all are introduced as if their concepts were so familiar to the critic, so well worn by the ceaseless action of his mind, that they require no elaboration. Use the word 'dialectic' for example without applying it to any concrete terms. In this way, you can cite Trotsky and even use the word 'revolution' without hobbling your career. Citation should equal incantation; it is a way of marking one's writing and what one is writing about with distinction. Be unconcerned that the theories you cite are thoroughly discredited or have unfortunate associations (with fascism for example); it is enough that the names, Freud or Jung, are familiar.
6. Use meta-judgments; these sound profound and are hard to challenge. Any poor painting can be presented as a coming-into-being of the aesthetic, and any work of art can be about art, or making art, or viewing art.
7. Let there be an inverse relation between the truth of your statement and the confidence of your pronouncement. 'There is no true way of picturing a mirror. Nor is there a way of perceiving reality in a mirror, which inverts any image before conveying it to the observer. Once more truth escapes.' (Mirrors do reverse their images, of course, but if Morgan thinks there's no way around that, he's never been to the barber's.)
8. Make unconnected statements appear part of an argument by linking them with the words 'so' and 'therefore'.

9. Identify with your artist. Get as close to them as you can. Make your voice and theirs one and the same, and present their insights also as your own. Work hard, write much, harry your artists with questions, and bone up on their enthusiasms.
10. Write about individuals. Match artists to their work as if one were the (uninverted) reflection of the other. This allows you to write of people rather than objects or processes, or to write of objects or processes as people. Gossip is, of course, more readable than criticism. Use ad hominem arguments. Stress the onerous, life-long labours of your artists, which are so much greater than those of nurses or hod-carriers.
11. Pretend that for comfortable, First World artists making art can be hazardous. On Edward Allington: ‘the act of repeatedly situating his works on boundaries between modes of vision, definitions of status and accepted functions of the object seems dangerous in the extreme—a way of courting and holding at bay forces he can barely gauge.’
12. Pose unspecified solutions to unspecified problems; art can be presented as the balm for our ailments. ‘The word “criticism” relates to the word “crisis”...’ and great work (including great criticism naturally) is produced in times of crisis—so produce a crisis, even if it is hard to say exactly what it is. Jeff Koons and Madonna are not pornographers (or even media manipulators), we are told; they use ‘the metaphor of pornography’ to ‘cry for help’ in an attempt to ‘return to depth and meaning in a way that is not compromised by the system within which artists are forced to operate’. From their profound dissent, maybe an art will develop in a ‘complete dissolution of values and expectations, an art that will unite aesthetes and sensation-seekers, the educated and the uneducated, and blow the old arguments to smithereens.’
13. Engage only in a quietist radicalism. Never make recommendations that might rock the market’s boat. I shall cite only one of many fine examples: ‘the myth of the avant-garde must be prolonged artificially in order to demonstrate that it no longer has force or significance.’
14. Obscure your actions by criticising their very foundations: Thérèse Oulton is actually commended for divesting painting of ‘sentimentality, spurious authority, bogus authenticity and hocus-pocus.’
15. Above all, be positive. In over 300 pages, just about the only negative comment is directed against Ann Hamilton’s installation for *Doubletake*—but here the genteel Morgan was provoked beyond measure for she had committed the cardinal sin of being at once too specific and too political.

These principles are not merely Morgan’s preserve. While he practices them well and successfully, many other butlers snap at his heels. The power that accrues to such a critic comes from publishing often and in the right places, and from reliably saying the right thing. It is not so much about what you say, but who you say it about. Given the multitude of galleries and artists vying for publicity, this power can be considerable, yet it is curiously mismatched with the writing to which it adheres. From such diverse views, occasioned by the market, no synthetic picture can emerge of the art world, that managed system which is part of a larger, managed culture. In this book, there is rarely any inkling that works of art are commodities, rather than somehow transcendent objects, or of the conditions of their production, or of hype. If Morgan is modest, especially when it comes to gauging the effect of his work, this is only a necessary tactic for a writing that cannot acknowledge its own power for fear of arousing thought about its function. Instead, all is covered in whimsy.

As a consequence, working through this collection sometimes becomes frustrating, and readers may feel an understandable urge to go beyond the paradox-mongering, to penetrate the surface, to grasp the inner meaning of the

words and with it the character of the critic, as he has done for so many an artist. Yet to try to do so would be a mistake. Morgan, bemoaning our tendency to think in paired concepts, says that we prefer personal 'depth' to 'breadth' and want to know people better by going deeper. It should not surprise us that he sees breadth as a virtue. But what if, he asks, 'people are solid all the way through, or below the outer casing only stuffing can be found?'

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