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Moral Proximity: Ethics as Method in Post-Interpretive Criticism

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Written at the Threshold

Art criticism has long been animated by the impulse to possess. To interpret is to seize, to colonize, to stand over a work and declare its meaning as if it were territory.

The critic became an arbiter of truth, turning works into property of discourse rather than thresholds of experience. Yet interpretation, when compulsive, isn't neutral; it's conquest masquerading as care. Post-Interpretive Criticism reframes this impulse by grounding the critic not in mastery but in responsibility.

It argues that the critic's role isn't to interpret from above but to remain near, to preserve nearness as method. Moral proximity is this method. It's the ethical discipline that asks the critic to witness without seizing, to remain in the difficult space of relation without rushing to reduce.

This departure isn't sudden. It emerges from a long crisis in criticism. Clement Greenberg's modernism cast the critic as judge, defender of purity, master of categories. Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault seemed to strike down this authority with the "death of the author" and the dispersal of meaning, yet their very liberation invited a new kind of inflation: endless interpretation, a proliferation of readings that still treated art as quarry to be mined.

Susan Sontag, in her 1964 essay *Against Interpretation*, warned that interpretation "impoverishes, it depletes the world" and called for an "erotics of art" instead. Yet even her provocation couldn't slow the inflation. The critic remained caught between mastery and performance, between the arrogance of definition and the compulsion of cleverness. Post-Interpretive Criticism insists there is another way. It insists that the critic isn't a conqueror, not even a performer, but a custodian. Custodianship is grounded not in distance but in proximity. To be near is to be responsible.

This principle resonates with Emmanuel Levinas, who defined ethics as arising in proximity to the other: "The responsibility for the Other, irrecusable and nontransferable, precedes every free consent, every pact, every contract" (Otherwise Than Being). For Levinas, proximity isn't spatial but moral; it's the nearness that binds without possession. The critic, too, is bound by this responsibility: to guard without seizing, to protect without appropriating.

This nearness isn't sentimental. It's severe. Martin Heidegger's notion of Gelassenheit, "releasement", captures the rigour of restraint (Discourse on Thinking). To let a work be isn't to abandon it but to shield it from the violence of interpretive conquest. The critic's task isn't to fill the silence but to preserve it, for silence isn't absence but presence. In silence the work breathes. In silence it remains near.

The demand for moral proximity is heightened in our age because interpretation has become inflationary.

The contemporary art world thrives on commentary; journals, catalogues, wall texts, and press releases multiply meanings to feed institutions. Criticism becomes performance, interpretation becomes currency.

Yet this very inflation hollows art. Works become scaffolds for discursive acrobatics rather than thresholds of experience. Here the critic's restraint becomes radical. To write with moral proximity is to stand against the inflationary urge. It's to declare: not all can be said, and not all should be said.

Consider Teresa Margolles, whose works confront the aftermath of violence in Mexico. In En el aire (2003), soap bubbles drift through the gallery, filled with water used to wash corpses in the morgue. The work is at once beautiful and unbearable. Critics often rush to allegorize: the bubbles as fragility of life, as commentary on Mexico's politics, as metaphor for memory. Yet each interpretation consumes the work, folds it into language, makes it manageable.

Margolles doesn't offer metaphor. She offers presence. To stand amid her bubbles is to be touched by death without mediation. The critic's responsibility isn't to interpret but to guard that trembling presence. Adorno's insistence that "art's truth is the sedimented history of suffering" (Aesthetic Theory) resonates here. To protect the presence of suffering without reducing it's the critic's task.

Or consider Christian Boltanski's installations of clothing, photographs, and dim light. His works recall the absent bodies of the Holocaust without depicting them. In Reserve des Suisses Morts (1990), stacks of clothing evoke both archive and grave. The temptation is to interpret, to assign symbolic meaning: the clothes as allegory of loss, as stand-ins for trauma.

Yet Boltanski himself resisted definitive readings, insisting his works aren't about but are traces of presence. Here moral proximity disciplines criticism: to describe without seizing, to bear witness without ownership. Derrida's notion of the "trace" (Of Grammatology) illuminates this: presence as absence, memory as remainder. The critic protects the trace by refusing to reduce it to concept.

Marina Abramović's The Artist Is Present (2010) at MoMA has become one of the most mythologized works of performance art. Visitors queued for hours to sit silently opposite her. The interpretive inflation was immediate: critics framed it as intimacy, as spectacle, as cult of personality, as institutional branding.

Yet the work itself was simple: nearness without words. Levinas described the face-to-face as relation, not vision. Abramović's performance enacted this: to sit across from another was to be bound without interpretation. The critic's responsibility is to preserve this nearness, not to inflate the mythology. To let the performance be is to resist the urge to make it currency. Heidegger's letting-be finds discipline here.

Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook complicates this further. In The *Class (2005)*, she lectured corpses as if they were students. In her dog works, she approaches stray animals with the same gravity she brings to the dead, extending ethical attention to those society discards. These acts hover between absurdity and reverence. Western critics often rushed to allegorize them as cultural rituals, exoticized them as Thai commentary.

Yet the works themselves were about dignity, the dignity of the dead, the dignity of animals. To interpret them as allegories was to sever their fragile presence. In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno insisted that the need to let suffering speak is a condition of all truth. Rasdjarmrearnsook's works let suffering speak without translation. The critic must not silence that speech with interpretation.

Ana Mendieta's Silueta Series imprinted her body in earth, fire, and water. These traces vanish as soon as they appear. Critics often frame them through exile or gender, yet their force lies in their ephemerality. Derrida's trace resonates here: absence as presence. Levinas spoke of proximity as unavoidable responsibility (Otherwise Than Being). Mendieta's traces demand this responsibility. To overinterpret is to betray them. The critic who remains near protects their fragility.

These case studies clarify moral proximity as method. What, then, does this method entail? First, description over interpretation. The critic records presence without seizing meaning. Second, restraint as discipline. Silence, brevity, withholding are ethical acts. Third, witness as evidence. Memory, residue, and emotional afterlife are valid evidence of art's force. Fourth, guardianship over mastery. The critic sees themselves as custodian, not conqueror. Fifth, ethics as aesthetics. The style of criticism embodies restraint, becoming itself an act of letting-be.

This method reconfigures authority. The critic's power isn't to explain but to protect. Sontag demanded an erotics of art, but moral proximity extends this: an ethics of nearness. The critic is no longer interpreter but custodian of consequence. Their writing isn't ownership but guardianship.

This reframing resonates across philosophy. Levinas anchors responsibility in proximity. Heidegger insists on letting-be. Derrida protects the trace. Adorno resists closure. Gadamer's hermeneutics emphasizes dialogue, yet PIC reframes dialogue as restraint rather than expansion. Foucault warns that interpretation is control, a will to knowledge. All converge on a single point: nearness demands responsibility.

To interpret is to seize. To witness is to guard. This aphorism encapsulates PIC's demand. The critic's highest responsibility isn't to explain art but to protect its nearness. In an age of inflationary interpretation, this restraint is radical. It's a refusal to let language devour presence. It's a discipline of silence in a culture of noise. It's moral proximity as method.

To write with moral proximity is to remain near without conquest, to preserve without consuming, to witness without spectacle. This isn’t an aesthetic choice but an ethical demand. The critic’s authority lies not in what they say but in what they refuse to say. The power of restraint is the power to protect.

Post-Interpretive Criticism reframes the critic as custodian of consequence. In the fragility of presence, in the silence of witness, in the nearness that binds, lies the future of criticism. Moral proximity isn’t one tool among others. It’s the method itself, the discipline of responsibility in the face of art.

The critic’s task, then, is simple and severe: to remain near.

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