

01 Corpus of Research & Doctrine

The Afterlife of the Work: Viewer as Evidence in Post-Interpretive Criticism

01 Sep 2025 14 min read

Permanent Record Omeka Library Publisher Museum of One Journal Post-Interpretive Criticism
Series Foundational Archived By Library & Archives Canada

Dorian Vale

Written at the Threshold

Art doesn't end when the lights dim, nor when the object is returned to its pedestal. Its most decisive movements begin after departure, in the strange residue that follows the encounter. This residue, memory, silence, aftertaste, isn't an accident but a form of evidence. The afterlife of a work isn't secondary to its meaning but constitutive of it. To reduce a work to its origins, to its biography or iconography, is to amputate the very space where it proves itself: the survival of its effect in the life of a witness.

Traditional criticism has rarely known what to do with this afterlife. Hermeneutics, from Schleiermacher to Gadamer, centred interpretation as the discipline of understanding. The critic's task was to reconstruct horizons: to enter into the historical context of the work, to fuse past and present. Gadamer, in *Truth and Method*, argued that "understanding is to be thought less as a subjective act than as part of the history of effect" (Gadamer). But even here, "effect" was subordinated to interpretation: the event of understanding took precedence over the residue of experience. The viewer was never evidence, only a vessel for hermeneutic performance.

In the twentieth century, the pendulum swung toward suspicion. Structuralists and post-structuralists dismantled origin in favour of text, language, discourse. Roland Barthes declared the "death of the author" (*Image-Music-Text*), repositioning the work as a field of signs, infinitely re-interpretable.

Michel Foucault, in "What Is an Author?", reframed authorship as a function of discourse, not a personal source. Both moves dethroned origins, but they enthroned the critic in their place. Interpretation proliferated as mastery. The afterlife of the work, the silence, the grief, the private ache, was again occluded, this time by the critic's performance.

Susan Sontag glimpsed the problem when she wrote, in *Against Interpretation*, that "in place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art." She recognized that interpretation suffocates immediacy, that the critic's compulsion to explain flattens the felt. But even her "erotics" framed the encounter in terms of desire, intensity, and immediacy. What she left underdeveloped was the temporal dimension: what happens not during but after. The residue of art is not just intensity; it is duration.

Post-Interpretive Criticism names this duration as *afterlife*. The term isn't metaphor but method. The afterlife of a work isn't the surplus of meaning but the survival of effect. To take the witness seriously is to treat their memory, silence, and alteration as evidence of the work. The critic is not called to explain but to record, to honour the traces that persist beyond the object.

This reframing is necessary because contemporary art, more than ever, trades in aftermath. Consider the work of Doris Salcedo. Her *Atrabiliarios* (1992–97) encases worn shoes of the disappeared behind translucent animal skin. The objects aren't illustrative but interruptive: they resist full visibility, leaving the viewer in the half-light of mourning. No interpretation exhausts this. What remains is the silence one carries after leaving the gallery: the memory of absence, the ache of unresolved loss.

This silence isn't anecdotal; it's the work's survival.

Or take Teresa Margolles' *En el aire* (2003), an installation where soap bubbles are produced from water used to wash corpses in Mexico City morgues. The bubbles shimmer and pop in seconds. No object remains, no form endures. The only possible evidence is afterlife: the knowledge that what touched your skin carried the residue of death, the haunting that resurfaces hours later.

Margolles demonstrates that the critic who refuses to treat afterlife as evidence has nothing left to write about.

This demand intensifies when art takes the form of performance. Marina Abramović's *The Artist Is Present* (2010) at MoMA lasted three months, during which she sat silently across from museum visitors. What remains now aren't the hours of silence themselves but the testimonies: the tears of strangers, the viral photographs, the memory of having been seen. The performance survives in its witnesses. To ignore these residues is to erase the work itself.

Post-Interpretive Criticism, then, doesn't propose a new interpretation but a new locus of evidence. Where hermeneutics privileged horizon-fusion, and post-structuralism privileged text, PIC privileges residue. The afterlife isn't metaphorical but juridical: it testifies, it binds, it holds weight.

Philosophy strengthens this claim. Jacques Derrida, in *Specters of Marx*, introduced "hauntology" as the recognition that what is absent continues to exert presence. Haunting isn't illusion but ontology: "the specter isn't simply present, it's not simply absent" (Derrida). Art, too, haunts. Its residue lingers in the memory of witnesses, spectral yet binding. Emmanuel Levinas, in *Otherwise Than Being*, argued that responsibility isn't exhausted in the moment of encounter but extends infinitely: "the face speaks… and this speaking is responsibility" (Levinas). The afterlife of art operates similarly: the work addresses us beyond its presence, obligating us after departure.

This emphasis on aftermath also aligns with psychology. Maurice Halbwachs, in *On Collective Memory*, demonstrated that memory is always socially situated, shaped by the frameworks of groups. The afterlife of a work is carried not only in individual memory but in collective retellings, in stories that circulate after exhibitions, in communities that inherit grief or beauty. Cathy Caruth, in *Unclaimed Experience*, showed how trauma is registered belatedly, in

symptoms and repetitions rather than immediate recognition. Many artworks, especially those born from violence, operate in this temporal delay: their effect arrives after the encounter. To ignore this is to misrecognize their very form.

What emerges is a demand: the critic must write not only of what is seen but of what is remembered. The task isn't to interpret objects but to record residues, to honour silence as evidence. This reverses centuries of critical practice. The critic is no longer an interpreter of symbols nor a performer of mastery but a custodian of afterlife.

The implications are profound. It means that criticism is no longer judged by its ingenuity of interpretation but by its fidelity to residue. To write of Margolles without acknowledging the lingering haunt is betrayal. To write of Salcedo without honouring the silence is erasure. To write of Abramović without recording the witness testimonies is falsification. The critic's authority is displaced: they aren't masters of meaning but witnesses among witnesses.

This displacement also resists the institutional overproduction of meaning. Museums, galleries, and journals often compel critics to fill silence with explanation, to render residue into text. But Post-Interpretive Criticism disciplines restraint: it insists that silence is already evidence, that not all residues must be spoken. To honour afterlife sometimes means to leave it untranscribed, to protect the dignity of what lingers.

In this sense, PIC introduces a new epistemology. The viewer isn't a passive consumer but an evidentiary archive. The work survives not in objects but in memories, not in texts but in silences. The critic's method is to tend this archive, to testify to the traces without reducing them. This isn't less rigorous than interpretation; it's more. For it demands fidelity to what is most fragile: what persists only in witnesses.

Here lies the ethical weight. To treat residue as evidence is to affirm that art lives on in us, and that we are responsible for carrying it. The afterlife of the work isn't private indulgence but public trust. To forget is to erase; to misremember is to distort. The critic's task is to remember rightly, to write as one bound by responsibility to the work's survival.

The afterlife of the work, then, isn't secondary. It's the work.

Part II — Philosophical Deepening and Case Studies

If the afterlife of the work is to be treated as evidence, then we must establish not only its necessity but its legitimacy. For centuries, criticism has treated the viewer's response as anecdotal, too subjective to bear weight. Yet philosophy and art history alike have shown that subjectivity isn't trivial but foundational. What matters in art isn't the object as inert matter but the object as it survives in relation. To recognize afterlife as evidence isn't to weaken rigour but to extend it into its proper domain: the temporal endurance of effect.

Philosophers from multiple traditions have already charted fragments of this terrain. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, insisted that perception isn't a snapshot but a continuity; what we see continues to work in us, shaping our being-in-the-world. Jacques Derrida's notion of the *trace* in *Of Grammatology* described how presence always carries the imprint of what is absent, a survival inscribed in language and memory. Emmanuel Levinas, as noted, treated the face of the Other as a demand that outlives the encounter.

These insights converge in the recognition that art, too, is carried beyond the moment. The witness isn't incidental; they are the archive through which art survives.

Art history, when pressed, reveals the same truth. Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* sought to trace recurring pathos-formulae across centuries of images: gestures of grief, ecstasy, violence that return like hauntings in cultural memory. What Warburg charted as iconographic survivals can be reframed as afterlife: images exerting power long after their making. Walter Benjamin, in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History," spoke of the past flashing up in moments of danger, demanding to be remembered. The work of art, like history, survives not as a static artifact but as a recurring apparition in the conscience of witnesses.

Case studies make this even clearer. Doris Salcedo's *Atrabiliarios*, mentioned earlier, encases the shoes of the disappeared in Colombia behind translucent animal skin. Viewers can't see the shoes directly; they appear as phantoms, partially obscured, fragile. What survives isn't information but mourning.

To leave the installation is to carry absence: the memory of what cannot be fully seen. The work's power is measured not by what is displayed but by what lingers. Critics who reduce *Atrabiliarios* to biography or political allegory betray its form, for its form is absence that survives as ache. Here, the afterlife isn't surplus; it's the only legitimate evidence.

Zarina Hashmi's *Home Is a Foreign Place* (1999) makes a similar demand. The portfolio of thirty-six woodcuts pairs Urdu words with abstract forms, each word charged with personal and collective memory: *ghar* (home), *dari* (door), *zindagi* (life).

The prints are stark, minimal, fragile. To encounter them is to be addressed by the disjunction between word and form, memory and abstraction. But the true work begins after: when the words echo days later, when one hears "home" in another context and recalls the fragile etchings, when absence becomes palpable in language itself. Zarina doesn't offer interpretation but implanting, her work continues to live only if the viewer carries it.

The critic's task isn't to decode symbols but to record this implantation, to testify that the work's afterlife is its primary existence.

Teresa Margolles' *En el aire* makes the case even more sharply. The bubbles, made from water that has washed corpses, burst on the skin of viewers before vanishing. Nothing remains

except the knowledge of contact, the haunting of what touched you. A day later, one may still recall the chill: I was touched by death disguised as play.

The critic who insists on remaining at the level of materials ("soap, water, morgue") has already lost the work. The only evidence is afterlife. What persists is the haunting, the aftertaste, the disturbance that erupts belatedly. Cathy Caruth's analysis of trauma as belatedness in *Unclaimed Experience* illuminates this perfectly: the event isn't known in the moment but returns later as symptom. Margolles stages trauma as aesthetic form. To miss the afterlife is to miss the work itself.

Christian Boltanski's *Reserve of Dead Swiss* (1990) covers a wall with photographs of ordinary Swiss citizens, paired with dangling lightbulbs. The images are banal, almost bureaucratic, but arranged en masse they invoke a memorial to anonymous lives. What lingers isn't information but the strange unease of having looked upon so many strangers at once, of having witnessed a collective mortality.

Days later, the faces return unbidden in memory. Boltanski's work insists that afterlife is its true form: the unsettling awareness that your own anonymity is mirrored in theirs. The critic's responsibility isn't to interpret "Swiss identity" or "collective portraiture" but to testify to the memory that survives in the viewer.

Marina Abramović's *The Artist Is Present* extends this principle into performance. For three months, she sat silently at MoMA, facing individual visitors. Some wept; some smiled; some collapsed into themselves. The performance ended in 2010, but it survives in countless testimonies, photographs, recollections.

Its afterlife has arguably eclipsed the event itself. To write of this work now is to write of its residues: the memory of being seen, or the viral images of strangers crying, or the fact that one knows of the piece without having attended. Abramović demonstrates that the afterlife of the work isn't supplementary; it's the work's archive. The critic who refuses to treat afterlife as evidence erases the work's primary form of existence.

Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook, the Thai artist, provides perhaps the clearest challenge. In *The Class* (2005), she sits before rows of corpses, lecturing them as though they were students. The scene is absurd, tender, devastating. Viewers are confronted with death not as spectacle but as audience.

The initial shock gives way to lingering disturbance: why did she speak so gently to the dead? Why did I feel complicit, as though I too were being lectured among the corpses? Days later, these questions return with greater force. Rasdjarmrearnsook's work survives in afterlife. In the memory of having been addressed across the boundary of death. Interpretation (ritual, politics, Thai Buddhism) is insufficient; the work's truth is its residue.

Finally, Ana Mendieta's *Silueta Series* (1973–80), where she impressed her body's outline into earth, sand, and grass, often leaving behind traces destined to erode. The works themselves are gone, surviving only in photographs. Yet their true form is afterlife: the memory of her absence, the haunting of a body once present. Mendieta's *siluetas* are monuments of vanishing. The critic who insists on "interpreting" their symbolism misses the point: they are made to be residue, to survive only as afterlife in memory and testimony.

What unites these case studies is the recognition that art often operates not in presence but in residue, not in object but in afterlife. Salcedo, Zarina, Margolles, Boltanski, Abramović, Rasdjarmrearnsook, Mendieta, all refuse to be exhausted by the moment of encounter. Their works are designed to persist beyond themselves, to survive only in witnesses. To treat this survival as secondary is to betray the form.

Philosophy affirms this. Derrida's hauntology teaches us that what is absent continues to act; Levinas reminds us that responsibility extends beyond encounter; Caruth demonstrates that trauma is experienced belatedly; Halbwachs insists that memory is collective, not private. Together they form the scaffolding of Post-Interpretive Criticism's claim: the afterlife of the work is evidence.

This has methodological consequences. It means the critic must shift posture. No longer is the task to decode symbols, to situate works within movements, or to demonstrate theoretical cleverness. The task is to honour afterlife. This requires patience, restraint, attentiveness to memory. It may mean writing days or weeks after the encounter, when residues reveal themselves. It may mean leaving silence in place of forced interpretation. It may mean recording testimonies of others, recognizing that the collective carries the work beyond the individual.

In short: to practice Post-Interpretive Criticism is to become a custodian of afterlife.

Part III — Methodology, Responsibility, Manifesto

If we accept that afterlife is the primary evidence of art, then we must ask: what does this require of the critic? What changes when the witness becomes the archive? The answer isn't merely stylistic but methodological, ethical, even ontological. The critic is no longer a sovereign interpreter but a custodian of residue. Their responsibility is to preserve, to transmit, and sometimes to refrain.

This posture sets Post-Interpretive Criticism against centuries of critical tradition. From Giorgio Vasari's Renaissance biographies to Clement Greenberg's modernist manifestos, critics have presented themselves as the authorities who define meaning. They wrote as if art needed them to be complete, as though the work itself were raw material awaiting interpretation. But if afterlife is evidence, this arrogance collapses. The work doesn't need interpretation to exist. It needs witness. The critic's role isn't to own but to testify.

Philosophy has already prepared us for this inversion. Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* dismantled the idea of stable authorship and fixed meaning. Roland Barthes declared the "death of the author," shifting focus to the reader. Yet Barthes still positioned the reader as producer of meaning, a kind of interpretive sovereign. Post-Interpretive Criticism goes further: the critic isn't the producer of meaning at all but the recorder of afterlife. Their words are not the work's explanation but its continuation in witness form.

This requires humility. Martin Heidegger, in *Discourse on Thinking*, described *Gelassenheit*, a letting-be, as philosophy's truest task. For criticism, letting-be means refusing to close the work with interpretation, leaving open the space for its afterlife to unfold. The critic who rushes to explain has already foreclosed the possibility of survival. The critic who waits, who lingers, who attends to what returns belatedly, performs a more rigorous act.

The methodology of moral proximity intersects here. To be near without seizing, to remain present without conquest, is also to honour afterlife. Emmanuel Levinas's insistence that the Other always exceeds the Same applies directly: the work of art, like the face, can't be reduced to knowledge. It survives precisely because it resists capture. The critic who treats afterlife as evidence acknowledges that their role is ethical as much as intellectual.

In practice, this alters how one writes. First, it demands restraint of language. Susan Sontag warned in "Against Interpretation" that interpretation can suffocate the work. Post-Interpretive Criticism extends her warning: interpretation also suffocates afterlife, for it replaces memory with theory. The critic must learn to describe residue without subsuming it. This may mean writing with fragments, aphorisms, pauses, forms that mirror memory itself.

Second, it requires attention to belatedness. Cathy Caruth reminds us that trauma isn't experienced at the moment but returns later. Many works of contemporary art function in this way: they unsettle only after departure, when the residue surfaces unexpectedly. The critic must allow time, writing not only at the site but days, weeks, even years later. Their testimony is valid precisely because it is delayed, because it honours the work's rhythm rather than their own deadlines.

Third, it redefines evidence. In courts of law, testimony is evidence. In Post-Interpretive Criticism, witness is evidence. To say "this work lingered in me, it returned in a dream, it unsettled me while eating" isn't anecdotal but central. What art survives in us is the measure of its truth. This reframes criticism not as explanation but as testimony. The critic writes not to interpret but to remember.

Case studies show this methodology in action. Consider once more Margolles' bubbles. The critic who records only materials has missed the work. The critic who records the haunting a day later, *I still felt touched by death when washing my hands*, has preserved the afterlife. Or consider Mendieta's vanished *siluetas*. To insist on symbolic interpretation is futile; the only

valid criticism is to record the haunting: *I carry her absence as presence*. These are not impressions, they're evidence.

This reframing also alters the critic's relation to institutions. Museums and journals often demand interpretation, clarity, argument. They want the critic to produce meaning that can be catalogued. But the work often resists this. Post-Interpretive Criticism, in privileging afterlife, will often appear insufficient to institutional eyes. A paragraph of description, a page of silence, a record of residue, these may seem weak in comparison to theoretical essays. Yet they are truer. The critic must learn to withstand the institutional compulsion to interpret, to insist that witness is enough.

The stakes are high. To treat afterlife as evidence is to recognize that art survives only in the community of witnesses. If no one carries the residue, the work dies. In this sense, the critic's responsibility isn't only to the work but to memory itself. They aren't gatekeepers of meaning but guardians of survival. Their words are less explanation than preservation, less conquest than care.

This is why the metaphor of the critic as custodian is central. Custodianship isn't passive; it's labor. The custodian protects, maintains, cleans, preserves. They don't own what they care for but ensure it endures. The Post-Interpretive critic does the same: they tend the afterlife of the work, ensuring its residue isn't erased by noise, neglect, or overinterpretation. Their labor is quiet but essential.

In closing, we may risk aphorism. Art doesn't end when the lights go off in the gallery. It ends when the last witness forgets. The critic isn't there to interpret the work but to remember it. Their testimony isn't ownership but survival. Interpretation kills; witness preserves.

The future of criticism belongs to those who can testify. This is the manifesto of Post-Interpretive Criticism: That the afterlife of the work is evidence. That residue is more powerful than explanation. That silence, memory, and testimony are the critic's highest tools.

That to write isn't to conquer but to witness.

Museum of One — Written at the Threshold, 2025

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17076535

MUSEUM OF ONE © 2026