

Twin Peaks

MIRA SCHOR ON ROBERT HUGHES (1938–2012) AND HILTON KRAMER (1928–2012)

Only by demonstrating that he is on the side of History—aware of the laws of its unfolding, able to reconcile the art he likes with those laws—can a critic rise to seriousness, for otherwise criticism is merely the expression of subjective taste, and can claim no binding force.

—Robert Hughes¹

ROBERT HUGHES AND HILTON KRAMER had long, prolific, and important careers as art critics, writing for major mainstream publications with high national circulations at a time when such publications meant more in a smaller media field. Yet the very fact that these two gentlemen now find themselves sharing a Passages essay in *Artforum*—not only because of the coincidence of their dying within a few months of each other last year but also because of certain similarities in their more retrograde viewpoints—is itself a sign that their positions at key moments of transformation in art practice landed them on the “wrong” side of History: It’s not quite burial in the unconsecrated side of the cemetery, but no doubt each would have preferred his own private funeral service.

As an art critic for the *New York Times* from 1965 to 1982—chief art critic for the last nine of those years—and cofounder, in 1982, of the *New Criterion*, Kramer was respected for his intellect and incorruptible devotion to high art but loathed by many for his conservatism, both aesthetic and political, which made him dismissive of many post-1960 developments in art and culture, including Pop art, Conceptual art, and postmodernism. Hughes, as the longtime art critic for *Time* magazine and polymath author of major books on Australian art and history, as well as of monographs on Lucian Freud, Frank Auerbach, and Goya, was considered a brilliant writer with a maverick sensibility who was perhaps best known for sharply criticizing the decline of American culture in his best-selling polemic *Culture of Complaint* (1993), and of modern culture more broadly in his popular 1980 BBC television series, *The Shock of the New*.

To varying degrees both critics had often balked at changes in art after traditional art history and high modernism lost primacy to more contingent, political, and interdisciplinary art movements. But they find themselves on the “wrong” side largely because of their responses to the major transformations of art and culture in the 1980s, particularly the shift in aesthetic values from visuality, process, and form to identity, social history, and the primacy of language.

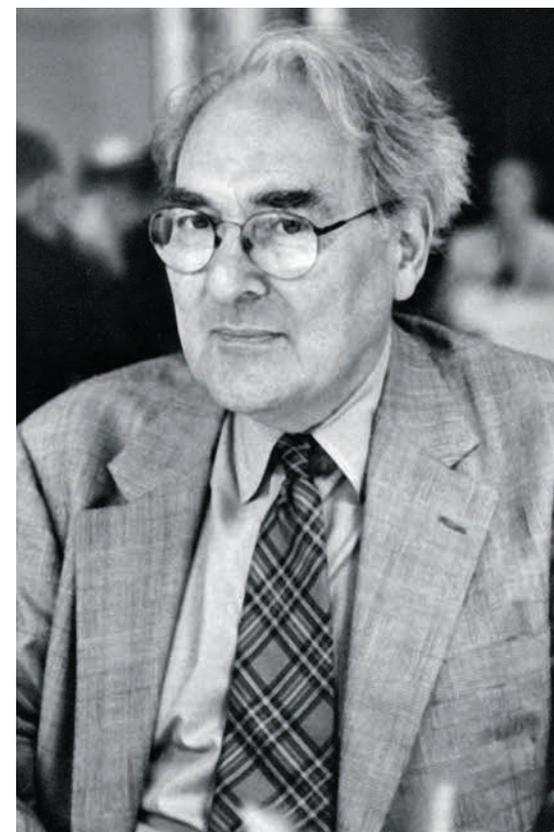
The ’80s were also marked by the exponential growth of the international art market and a hugely hyped art scene married to an intensified culture of

celebrity. This was also the decade when AIDS mobilized artists to address the sexual body with provocative frankness and to engage in political activism at the very moment of increasingly polarizing conservatism in national politics. The atmosphere was extremely contentious—this was the beginning of the “culture wars,” after all—but the very existence of strongly held conflicting discourses was bracing for many, including myself. It is in relation to this expanded polemic field that Hughes and Kramer often seemed out of step, not just with the academic elite or the market but with the richer field of practice taking place amid the polarizations of discourse. From the mid-’70s to the ’90s, one was of course *aware* of Hughes and Kramer but *read* Lucy Lippard, John Berger, Leo Steinberg, Linda Nochlin, Laura Mulvey, Carol Duncan, Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Yve-Alain Bois, Rosalind Krauss, Hal Foster, and Griselda Pollock (to name only a handful of luminaries).

Nevertheless, Hughes and Kramer were important figures in the debates of the period, and reading them

again now—with the dispassion that distance brings—offers some interesting perspectives. For example, in the heady atmosphere of the art market in the ’80s, their dislike of neo-expressionism and of painters like Julian Schnabel, David Salle, and Eric Fischl was itself notorious. Reviewing an exhibition of contemporary Italian art in 1982, Hughes wrote: “Most of the artists are obsessed, one way or another, with pastiche, allegory, narcissistic display, irony and side quotation. They are also inclined to a somewhat dandified and bogus kind of religiosity.”² He described Sandro Chia’s paintings, in one of his great turns of phrase, as “chic, like a Fendi fur with metaphysical yearnings.”³ They also criticized the spectacularization of the contemporary museum: Kramer described Tate Modern as a “monstrosity,” “bait to attract a segment of the public—free-spending youth—for which aesthetic achievement is, if not a matter of indifference, certainly not a compelling priority,”⁴ and the East Building of the National Gallery, the new Louvre, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art as having the “atmosphere of an emporium, a recreation facility, or a transportation center.”⁵ Hughes expressed similar dismay, writing in 1984 that the contemporary museum “has adopted, partly by osmosis and partly by design, the strategies of other mass media: emphasis on spectacle, cult of celebrity, the whole masterpiece-and-treasure syndrome.”⁶

From left: Robert Hughes at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation bureau, Washington, DC, January 28, 1987. Photo: Frank Johnston/Washington Post/Getty Images. Hilton Kramer, New York, 1997. Photo: Peter Aaron.





Above: Emile de Antonio, *Painters Painting*, 1973, 16 mm and 35 mm, black-and-white and color, sound, 116 minutes. Hilton Kramer.



Right: *The Shock of the New*, 1980, still from an eight-part TV series produced by the BBC. Robert Hughes.

Pastiche, allegory, religiosity, myth, spectacle—these were the same terms of opprobrium used against the same artists and institutions by critics writing for the journal *October*. History was unfolding, and opposite critical sides shared a dislike of some of the same art movements, so why did one faction seem to “win” and the other to lose?

One answer lies in their divergent views on mediums and modalities of artmaking, on the artwork as aesthetic entity or social text, on the language of criticism,

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and on identity politics. Responding to the infusion into art-writing of vocabulary from what people generally referred to as “theory,” Hughes wrote, “Jargon, native or imported, is always with us; and in America, both academe and the art world prefer the French kind, a thick prophylactic against understanding,” language that “intimidates . . . subject[ing] the reader to a rite of passage and extort[ing] assent as the price of entry.”⁷ Kramer, lamenting the obfuscatory prose produced by critical theory (or, in his more nuanced words, “academic twaddle”), praised Clement Greenberg for writing a “criticism that does not require us to surmount some impenetrable rhetorical barrier in order to discover what it is actually up to.”⁸

Hughes and Kramer loved painting and traditional

aesthetic values spurned by critics they felt dealt “with art objects as if they . . . were little more than social documents.”⁹ And in their call for a return to “quality,” they mourned the passage of historically based criteria. But criticizing the drawing skills of a Salle or a Fischl may have been beside the point, inasmuch as a Fischl endowed with conventional academic drawing skills might just as easily have turned into a modern-day Bouguereau as into a Manet. Though Hughes could write that painting is no longer “our index of the real,” he preferred such earlier modes of art.¹⁰

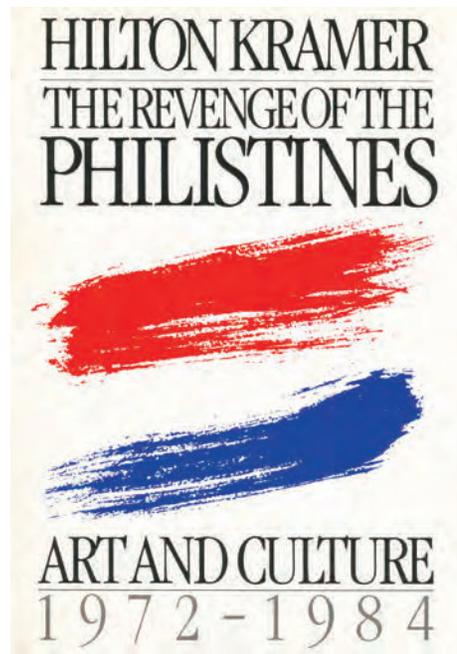
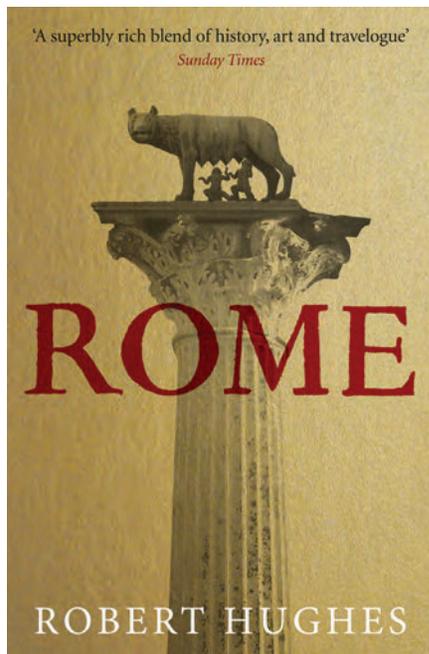
Alike in their disdain for identity politics, the two critics were repelled by radical sexual representations, and their prejudices could read as coded or blatant expressions of straight-white-male paranoia. In *Culture of Complaint*, Hughes made it all too easy for critics to cherry-pick homophobic, racist, and sexist sound bites such as:

The grotesque exaggeration of some victim-rhetoric can be gauged from the fact that we now have gay activists claiming that homosexuals, of all people, are and, within living memory, have been the victims of bigotry in the American art world. Of all places! In fact, as anyone with the slightest experience of it knows, the art world has long been a refuge for homosexuals, and their ‘suffering’ at its ‘bigotry’ can be gauged from the careers of Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Andy Warhol, Ellsworth Kelly, and others too numerous to list.¹¹ Or: “‘The Canon,’ that oppressive Big Bertha whose muzzle is trained . . . at the black, the gay, and the female. The Canon, we’re told, is a list of books by dead Europeans—Shakespeare and Dante and Tolstoy . . . you know, *them*, the pale patriarchal penis people.”¹²

The book was a complicated howl of exasperation at the hypocrisies of every political position in American life, bipartisan enough in its targets that one of the most vicious reviews of it appeared in the *New Criterion*, but Hughes had to know that his words added fuel to the very fires he criticized. Kramer in 1997 railed against “the pseudo-disciplines of gender studies, gay and lesbian studies, and the even more comprehensive field of cultural studies, all of which have had the effect of transforming history into a mythology that at times bears a remarkable resemblance to Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis*.”¹³

Such views may explain why Hughes and Kramer were so often tarred with the same brush; it is, then, all the more important to emphasize that they were very different figures, in substance and in style.

A look at their appearances on film is revealing. *Los Angeles Times* art critic Christopher Knight, in criticizing Hughes’s condemnation of mass culture (at a 1990 lecture at UCLA) despite being “the only art critic in history who had ever been a television star, and who owed his audience that night to the fact,” described Hughes, with his “rumbling Aussie voice,” as a “sort of dockyard Shakespeare”; but those very words could also be read as a complimentary description of Hughes’s engaging screen presence.¹⁴ In his personal and free-wheeling tour of modern art history, he makes vivid and compelling leaps of historical reference, as in the following sequence of scenes in “The Powers That Be,” the second episode of *The Shock of the New*, on modern architecture and art after World War I: Following a fascinatingly creepy film clip of Albert Speer talking about his goal of using architectural scale to shrink the individual to nothing, Hughes speaks about Italian



From left: Cover of Robert Hughes's *Rome: A Cultural History* (Phoenix, 2012). Cover of Hilton Kramer's *The Revenge of the Philistines: Art and Culture, 1972-1984* (Free Press, 1985).

fascist architecture while standing in front of an astonishing De Chirico-esque example near Rome, “classicism with a pastry cutter”; the next shot takes us to Lincoln Center in New York City, and another to the Empire State Plaza in Albany, suggesting that fascist architecture morphed into an institutionalized international style of public architecture in democratic regimes! It’s a memorably demonstrated assertion.

As for Kramer, one can’t shake the impression he makes in Emile de Antonio’s 1973 film *Painters Painting*, in which he is literally cornered in his office behind an awkwardly placed desk, as if in a last-ditch effort to hold off the enemy. He is pushed up against the wall by the force of modern art’s movement away from . . . well, from what? Although he is thought of as a champion of modernism and an admirer of Clement Greenberg, his statement in the film is a complete demolition of the critical edifice Greenberg had built and of which Kramer was supposedly keeper of the flame.

Hughes’s prose is roiling, erudite, and funny. He engages with art at the level of its materiality, and you always feel his joy in writing. In “Sublime Windbag,” a great review of the 1998 Drawing Center show of Victor Hugo’s “taches” drawings, he writes,

Larger than life, [Hugo] was almost larger than death: half a million people, the biggest funeral attendance since the death of Napoleon, followed his cortege to the freshly deconsecrated Pantheon, a building he detested and compared to a sponge cake. There he still lies. ‘Victor Hugo was a madman who thought he was Victor Hugo,’ bitched Jean Cocteau some decades later. So might a chihuahua fix its tiny fangs in the ankle of a bull elephant.¹⁵

Kramer didn’t have that range of cultural allusions in his writings or that kind of charm. His subject was high art, strongly adhered to though narrowly conceived. He wrote lucid praise of artists he admired—Henri Matisse, David Smith, Milton Avery, Pierre Bonnard, Alex Katz—but typically, the writing style of his art reviews is dry, like a tightly structured legal brief, and often takes a turn toward the prosecutorial and condemnatory. For example, “In the presence of the work, the fine discriminations of Pollock’s expositors read like a libretto for an opera that has remained largely unwritten. . . . Pollock stands to Picasso as [Allen] Ginsberg stands to Whitman and Pound: provincials aspiring to a status which their intrinsic gifts deny them.”¹⁶ Or, “Mr. [Robert] Mapplethorpe is unquestionably an accomplished photographer, but there remains much in his work that is not only derivative but second-rate. And it doesn’t lack, either, the kind of vulgarity and ostentation—I am speaking of aesthetic vulgarity—that is only the other side of a pervasive sentimentality.”¹⁷ Perhaps no one described this critical juggernaut more vividly than Robert Hughes in “Kramer vs. Kramer,” his review of *The Revenge of the Philistines* (1985):

Kramer’s manner had become one of the fixtures of American art discourse. You could hear him blocks away like a truck with a shot muffler warming up in an alley—his arrhythmic, industrial strength prose; the unconstrained ideological bias; his nostalgia for issues and cliques of New York intellectual life in the fifties (an emotion whose intensity was all the more remarkable for the fact that he was too young to have played a real part in them); his rancor in attack and his bravery in

defense. Kramer wrote clearly. Few read him for pleasure, but none could deny his intelligence, his tenacity, or his imperviousness to art fashions.¹⁸

The crux of the Hilton Kramer puzzle is that, as his aesthetic conservatism was increasingly warped by his political conservatism, even his defensible views about art seemed odious. There was a continuity in his thinking between the evils of Stalinism and “the cultural calamity”¹⁹ of New Left Radicalism in the ’60s, and between Marxist leaders such as Castro, Ho Chi Minh, and Mao and art historians like Svetlana Alpers, whose writings on Rubens he found “entirely representative of the intellectual catastrophe that has overtaken the writing of art history and art criticism in this last decade of the twentieth century.”²⁰

The *New Criterion* was backed by major figures in right-wing politics, such as Richard Mellon Scaife, who also supported the Heritage Foundation and the Federalist Society. When those forces attacked the National Endowment for the Arts, Hughes vigorously defended the NEA, no matter what he thought about individual artists like Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano, whereas Kramer used his influence to crush the NEA’s peer-reviewed individual-artist and art-criticism grant programs. He pursued his vitriolic attacks on contemporary culture to the end of his life. Conversely and significantly, after a near-fatal car crash in 1999, Hughes turned away from contemporary art to write about the art and history he had loved from his youth, producing deeply felt books about Goya and about the city of Rome.

Although at their worst Hughes and Kramer might seem stuck in a phantasmagoria of obsolete criteria, in their primary careers as art critics, under the pressure of writing weekly reviews, they wrote about an astonishingly varied group of artists. Given Kramer’s views on “wayward sexual subjects,”²¹ it may come as a surprise that he wrote very positively about the paintings of Romaine Brooks and considered Diane Arbus “one of the most remarkable photographic artists of the last decade.”²² Hughes eloquently supported Donald Judd and Leon Golub. Neither man could be thought of as a feminist, yet each wrote positive reviews of women artists with a solid understanding of how their gender had affected their work and place in history. Both supported Louise Nevelson and Lee Krasner; both praised Florine Stettheimer. Hughes wrote great reviews of Eva Hesse, Louise Bourgeois, and Elizabeth Murray. In these and other of their best texts, they fulfilled the task of the critic as outlined by Hughes in an appreciation of Sir Kenneth Clark: “No critic can make people see, but he can encourage them to look.”²³ □

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For notes, see page 268.