

Against the Compulsive Urge to Interpret

By Dorian Vale

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Art today drowns not in silence but in surplus. Walls in galleries sag beneath explanatory texts, catalogues become mausoleums of interpretation, and critics multiply interpretations until the work itself is barely visible.

What should have been a living encounter collapses into commentary. The art object doesn't breathe on its own; it's ventilated by discourse. This is the pathology of our moment: the compulsive urge to interpret.

The critic, the curator, the academic all operate under an unspoken law that silence equals failure. To say nothing is seen as neglect, to publish less is seen as incompetence. The institution itself has constructed this reflex: journals demand novelty, museums demand legibility for funding boards, critics demand cleverness to sustain persona.

In such a climate, interpretation isn't a choice but a compulsion. The critic's page is filled not because the work requires it, but because absence would disqualify them from relevance.

Yet silence isn't failure. Silence can be fidelity. To resist interpretation isn't to abandon the work but to let it remain in its dignity.

What is required now isn't more interpretation but discipline. A reframing of criticism as stewardship rather than seizure. Here, Post-Interpretive Criticism enters: not as anti-thought, but as a discipline that limits itself for the sake of presence.

This compulsion isn't new. Its genealogy runs deep through the history of aesthetics and philosophy. Kant, in the *Critique of Judgment*, universalized aesthetic judgment by subsuming beauty into the law of taste. The flower wasn't allowed to remain a flower; it became evidence of transcendental faculties. Hegel pressed further, conscripting art into the march of Spirit. Every artwork was explained as a step in the teleology of Absolute Knowledge.

The very autonomy of art was stripped; interpretation swallowed it into philosophy's hunger. Nietzsche unmasked interpretation as will to power, declaring there are no facts, only interpretations. His insight is key: interpretation isn't neutral but conquest.

Gadamer, with hermeneutics, demanded that understanding itself was the only true way to meet the work, dialogue became law. Even Barthes and Derrida, who declared the death of the author, merely enthroned the critic as master of textual play.

Interpretation became empire. Even Sontag, who in *Against Interpretation* urged an “erotics of art,” was consumed by the same system she resisted; her very resistance became another citation in the library of interpretation. The story is the same across epochs: philosophy makes interpretation into law, and criticism inherits compulsion as its duty.

The result is that many works collapse beneath interpretation. Consider Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917). A urinal inverted, signed *R. Mutt*. Duchamp displaced the object and let the gesture do the work. Yet for a century *Fountain* has been smothered with explanations: as readymade, as institutional critique, as parody of authorship. The real parody isn’t the urinal itself but the endless library of essays written to explain it. What Duchamp displaced, critics rushed to re-possess.

Teresa Margolles, by contrast, offers residues of violence: water used to wash corpses, blood-stained tiles, soap bubbles blown from morgue fluids. In *En el aire* (2003), bubbles drift through a gallery space, carrying the invisible presence of the dead. To interpret these bubbles as “ephemeral beauty” isn’t illumination but obscenity. These aren’t metaphors but literal matter touched by death. To aestheticize through commentary is to repeat the violation. A second desecration layered upon the first.

Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook stages equally fragile encounters. In *The Class* (2005), she lectures to corpses laid out like students. In *Two Planets* (2008), she films rural Thai villagers responding to Van Gogh and Millet. Institutions quickly drape these works in allegories of “East-West dialogue” or “postcolonial pedagogy.”

Yet each interpretive flourish pulls us further from the intimacy Araya creates. What should have unsettled us becomes domesticated by curatorial slogans. The work ceases to be an encounter and becomes a prop for an agenda.

Christian Boltanski’s installations function as shrines: photographs of the disappeared, piles of worn clothes, dim bulbs glowing like vigil candles. His art mourns without words, and yet critics rush to allegorize. To call his work “Holocaust metaphors” is to betray their altar-like presence. They aren’t metaphors but materialized mourning. To interpret them is to reduce mourning into symbol.

Even performance art isn’t spared. Marina Abramović’s *The Artist Is Present* (2010) was nothing more and nothing less than two people sitting across from one another. Yet interpretation suffocated it: feminist readings, performance genealogies, celebrity spectacle. The true shock of presence, sitting silently across from another human, was flattened by theory. The simplicity was what made it profound, and interpretation made it trivial.

Interpretation here isn’t illumination. It’s violence. It turns silence into chatter, wounds into slogans, presence into spectacle. The dignity of the work is stolen not by ignorance, but by cleverness.

Why does this compulsion persist? Because institutions demand it. Academia demands argument for the sake of publication. To say that a work resists interpretation is to risk rejection.

Museums require legibility to justify funding, turning every exhibition into a policy paper. Critics cultivate cleverness to sustain relevance in cultural markets; to say less is to vanish. In this sense, interpretation functions like what Adorno diagnosed in the culture industry: art is packaged as consumable commodity, and explanation is the packaging.

This is what Ricoeur called the “hermeneutics of suspicion”, a hermeneutics that can’t trust silence, that can’t allow a work to remain opaque. But suspicion has metastasized into compulsion. It’s no longer critique but addiction.

Some will defend interpretation, insisting that without it art is mute. Without context, the viewer is lost. Hermeneutics, they argue, democratizes art. But this is misunderstanding. Post-Interpretive Criticism isn’t anti-thought. It’s discipline. It does not abolish language; it regulates it. It doesn’t idolize silence; it protects it when speech would wound.

Interpretation democratizes at the cost of dignity. It opens discourse but closes presence. It claims accessibility but leaves us blind to the residue. Levinas reminds us that the ethical relation begins not with mastery but with restraint—to face the Other is to refuse to totalize them. To face the artwork requires the same: to refuse to consume it whole.

The role of the critic, then, must be reframed. The critic isn’t conqueror but custodian. Custodianship isn’t passivity but vigilance. It’s knowing when to describe and when to withhold. Heidegger spoke of “letting beings be.” The custodian-critic lets the work be. Witnessing, at its core, isn’t an act of conquest but of surrender.

To stand before a work is to allow it to remain unpossessed. The critic’s task is to guard without seizing, to let the fragile stay fragile. As one poet observed, silence is the truest language; all else risks distortion. To honour that silence in practice is the critic’s highest responsibility.

To resist interpretation isn’t anti-intellectualism but a higher discipline. It’s to testify without seizing, to describe without domesticating, to protect silence when words would desecrate. The compulsive urge to interpret can be broken only by oath, not mood. The custodian-critic adopts restraint not as aesthetic fashion but as moral law.

The oath is simple: to resist compulsion. To speak only when words dignify. To remain silent when speech would betray. In this, criticism is reborn as guardianship rather than conquest.

The world doesn’t need more interpretations. It needs witnesses who know when to say nothing. To interpret compulsively is to betray. To restrain is to serve.

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This essay extends Dorian Vale's founding of Post-Interpretive Criticism (2025), a movement reframing art criticism as custodianship of consequence rooted in restraint, witness, and moral proximity.