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CRITICALLY SPEAKING

Cabinet editor **Brian Dillon** on contemporary art versus contemporary fiction.

There are few other critics at work today more consistently interesting on as wide a range of subjects as Brian Dillon. Born in Dublin in 1969, Dillon is a regular contributor to the *Dublin Review,* the *London Review of Books, Art Forum, frieze* and *Cabinet,* the indefinable conceptual quarterly where he works as UK editor. Come of age under the influence of Roland Barthes, Dillon is a writer whose revelatory criticism – often quietly engaged in transcending its own form – wears the weight of its theory lightly. Since leaving academia a decade ago, Dillon's voice has become steadily more apparent and more authoritative. He is perhaps the closest Ireland has come to producing a Susan Sontag.

Dillon is the author of five books, including *In the Dark Room* (2005), *Nine Hypochondriac Lives* (2009) and *I Am Sitting in a Room* (2011), an Oulipian-style study of writers' rooms written before an audience in just 24-hours. His work does not necessarily take place within the form of the essay. Yet even his novella, *Sanctuary* (2009), is notable for its sense of 'alertness', 'attention' and 'transcription', three qualities Dillon says 'justify the miscellaneous essayist's way of being and working'. Dillon's work is always essayistic, in other words, even when it's not. And so the forthcoming publication of *Objects in This Mirror,* a selection of essays written over the last ten years, makes for a particularly welcome addition to his growing catalogue. With essays on contemporary art, ruin aesthetics, photography and the essay itself, *Objects in This Mirror* reflects a core set of Dillon's interests. At the same time, essays on the Common Cold Unit, the Dewey Decimal System and Victorian gesture manuals work to deflect the idea that such a core set is ever adequate.

You write that *Objects in This Mirror* is 'a book that is also a partly (like all such collections) a way of naming and putting an end to a phase in your writing'. Do you mean 'phase' in a merely temporal sense, or is there something more substantial to it? Are you about to start writing sports journalism or what?

[Laughs] No, I don't think so. If it's a phase, I think it's in the sense of an education. A decade or so ago, I had finished a PhD in English – I started it in Trinity, then moved to Canterbury and finished up at the University of Kent – when I realised, first of all, that I didn't really fancy the idea of an academic career, and that, secondly, academia didn't really fancy giving me that career. I started writing for magazines and papers, doing book reviews for places like the *TLS* and the *Irish Times,* and writing about art for magazines like *frieze* and *Art Review.* It was an education in art, firstly. I was always interested in contemporary art, but I'd never properly engaged with it in terms of writing. Secondly, it was an education in a different sort of writing, in leaving behind a certain kind of academic style and trying to invent a different voice. I think of it as a phase of discovering what was possible for me. Also, when I started out, people would always say that it was no longer possible to make a living as a reviewer, as a critic, as a freelance writer. They said that era was over. Somewhere in the back of my head, I think I felt like testing that. And it turned out that it was actually possible to make a living – a really meagre living, but still. On several levels, then, I suppose it's been a phase of figuring out.

Within that phase, can you notice your own style changing – from book to book, say? Do you still recognise the Johnsonian style your father identified in your undergraduate writing?
I think George Orwell is a badly overrated writer. I don't like George Orwell, and I don't like his essay on book reviewing much either. But there is something in that piece that I think is true: book reviewing is a performance. After a while, it becomes harder to sustain that performance. So I'm really glad that I started writing about contemporary art, a field that I wasn't particularly familiar with, because I think that the career of a literary reviewer is quite limiting in the end. Looking back at the early stuff, then, I think that if things have changed it's that I'm a little less... smart-arsed.

You speak of writing 'first on books and then on photography, increasingly of contemporary art in general'. Did this transition take place because of a perceived lack of conceptual strength in most contemporary literature? Do you think this lack of conceptual strength is perhaps the reason why a career as a literary reviewer can be quite limiting?
My patience for fiction that isn't *very* sophisticated is kind of limited. This sounds stupid, but I like really, really, really good fiction. I get bored very easily with what you might call 'middling' fiction. Even writing about non-fiction can be kind of limiting, simply because there aren't the same kind of venues for doing that outside of newspaper reviews and the big literary magazines. I started writing about contemporary art because I started writing for art magazines, which seemed a little different. It seemed like art magazines were interested in all kinds of things. So, for a magazine like *frieze,* I could write about, say, the history of zoos or the history of notebooks – all sorts of subjects – because the editors were interested in making a publication that reflected a culture not limited to that of contemporary art and the views of contemporary artists, curators and so on. It turned out that the art world and artists were far more interested in the culture around them than it seemed the literary world was. The art world was a place where you could write – where you could be a writer. It seemed more welcoming and much more intellectually curious than the literary world – certainly the mainstream literary world anyway. Other people have said this, of course. Tom McCarthy's *C* was famously published by a tiny art press in Paris. Over the last decade, which is the span that this book covers, the art world has felt like a very welcoming place to be a writer.

There aren't many negative pieces in this collection, I notice. Do you believe in the value of negative reviews? Or do you think, like the critic Lev Grossman, that in an increasingly democratised cultural field, where everyone has their say online, the role of the critic is not to judge, in the sense of thumbs up and thumbs down, but to suggest how a work of art might best be approached?
The Russian art critic Boris Groys said on this topic that the role of the critic is no longer to judge, but simply to point. To say to the reader: this thing exists; it is worth your paying attention to. And I suppose that's kind of true. A lot of reviews of books and exhibitions are really just deictic – they simply point; they say 'here is this thing'. I don't relish writing bad reviews, but nor do I go along with that piece published a few years ago in *The Believer* called 'Against Snark', which was against the idea of a bitchy literary culture. I just think that's nonsense. That kind of upbeat, inclusive culture sounds terribly dull to me. I've written some fairly nasty reviews – mostly of fiction, oddly – but I didn't put any of them in the book. John Banville says that he's never published a collection of his essays because he doesn't think he writes essays; he thinks he writes reviews. I don't know if that's true of him, but I think it might be true of some of those book reviews that might have gone in this book. They just seem a little bit too tied to their moment.

Your own critical approach seems immersed in literary history. Although your writing is generally concerned with contemporary artistic ideas or practice, you tend to construct your essays around quotations by Thomas De Quincey, Thomas Browne, Robert Burton, Michel de Montaigne, etc. Does your familiarity with these authors precede your interest in those more contemporary ideas? Or do you come to these older authors by way of their relation to contemporary ideas?
It's something of both, I think, because the names you've just mentioned are all of writers I've loved for a very long time. Partly what I love about them is a certain kind of excess in style. This is certainly the case with De Quincey and Browne, anyway. I really love their excess, even if what I write doesn't have the same kind of scrawl. It's something I really admire about certain periods, I suppose. One is the 17th century; the other is the Romantic period, although I guess De Quincey is kind of an anomaly. The other thing I like is how these writers treat the essay as a form. Going all the way back from the 19th century, through to the 17th century, right back to Montaigne, what you see is a sort of curiosity, a kind of variety, a sense that in the essay you can write about absolutely anything.

So, if they were around today, it'd be a tiny art press in Paris publishing these guys?
Totally. They'd be writing in *Cabinet.* They'd be publishing *Cabinet.*

Objects in the Mirror is released through Sternberg this month.