JOE DAY –

Bad News Bear

DOOMED ASTRONAUT: "OPEN THE POD BAY DOORS, HAL."

HAL 9000: "I'M SORRY, DAVE, I'M AFRAID I CAN'T DO THAT." [1]

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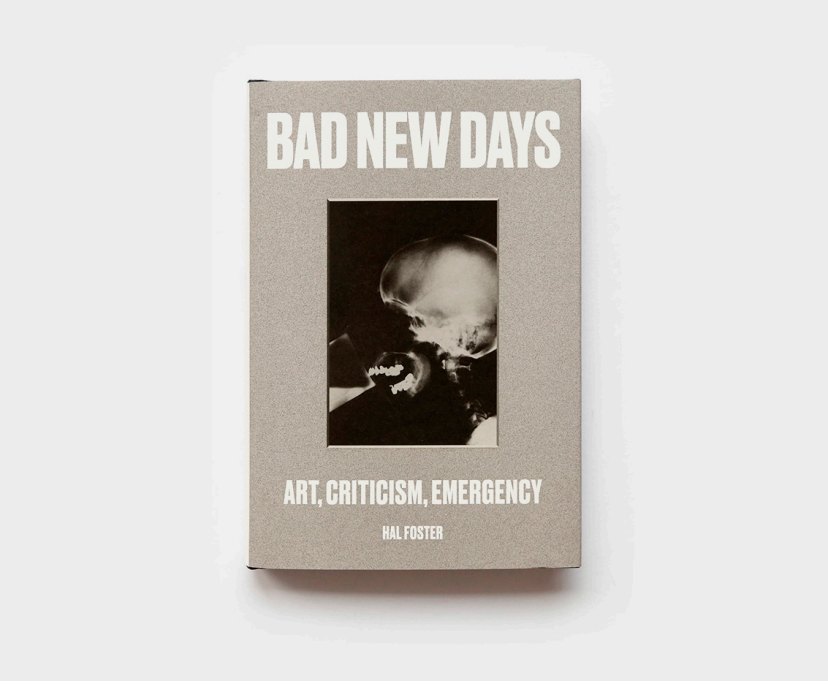
Many are the stories of architects' hubris in the face of art they do not understand: James Stirling's tantrum over the "junk" by Joseph Beuys cluttering the opening of his Staatsgallerie in Stuttgart, for example, or Richard Meier's failure to realize that the multihued garden at the Getty by Robert Irwin would prove more culturally salient and more wildly popular than his buildings surrounding it. These tales share a common moral: architects—their senses dulled by self-regard, proximity to power, or both—often fail to *see* the art before them, much less grasp its radicality in the face of their own efforts. Few have made this point as forcefully and repeatedly as Hal Foster.

***Bad New Days,* the most recent collection of Foster's essays, targets his primary audience within contemporary art but should resound for architects**



Hal Foster's *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency.* Published by Verso Books, 2015.

[1] *2001: A Space Odyssey,* directed by Stanley Kubrick (Los Angeles: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1968).

as well, if only to save them from faux pas like the ones above. The Townsend professor of art and archaeology at Princeton, Foster enjoys a complicated double-, or perhaps triple-, agency between disciplines, especially in the wake of his *Design and Crime* (2002) and *The Art-Architecture Complex* (2011), which captured many of the fault lines, overlaps, and tensions between contemporary environmental practices.

Though Foster's commentary spans many fields of cultural production, architectural theorists tend to find him more a foil than a protagonist. While his writing on architecture is both more astute and widely informed than most of the criticism generated within the discipline, his bets on the established generations are more academic than revelatory: he favors Koolhaas's conceptual gymnastics over Gehry's object fixations, for example, and he overlooks many smaller practices deeply engaged with new art after his go-to examples Herzog & de Meuron and Diller Scofidio + Renfro. Worse, his choices of artists that might instruct architects often seem patronizing, especially Richard Serra, to whom he ceded much of the conclusion of his *A-A Complex.*

The shorthand contraction of that title, however, points to how defining Foster has been in transdisciplinary terms. Foster was a guiding light for those entering any visual discipline circa 1990. His role in compiling the 1983 anthology *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture,* and even more so, his helming of the first Dia Foundation Discussions in Contemporary Culture, made him the most user-friendly of the "*October*fest" art critics. Until rather late in the '90s—that is, until Sanford Kwinter, Jeff Kipnis, and Sylvia Lavin found their strides in framing the "contemporary" in *Grey Room* and the various *ANY* installments—Foster and his colleagues at *October* and *ArtForum* hosted an exponentially more advanced dialogue than those animating any journal of architecture. Before attention shifted to globalization and the digital turn, one could safely read any current art theory and be ahead of architecture's curve. Even the best in the field, including Anthony Vidler and Beatriz Colomina, were lucky to be invited to the party and needed their A-game to keep up. [2]

It was in those pre-millennial years that I became an apostle of Hal Foster, or at least an early adherent to his then-evolving denomination. [3] *Vision and Visuality,* the second Dia Discussion Series anthology of 1988, convened and edited by Foster, inspired my practice, and one inclusion, "The Scopic Regimes of Modernity" by Martin Jay, still opens most of the courses I teach. In the brief pause between Derrida's and then Deleuze's monopolies on the American architectural imagination, visual studies posed a promising alternative. After medium specificity, perhaps a "sensory specificity"—here, a close reading of sight and ways of seeing—could open new horizons for art, or architecture. Foster's authors in *V&V* drew varying allegiances—mine were to Jay and Foster's mentor Rosalind Krauss, but many of my peers followed Jonathan Crary more closely (*Techniques of the Observer,* 1990), and still others Norman Bryson. Their positions, perspectives, and points of view on how to describe and quantify visual dynamics became many architects' shorthand for how to see—and portray, project, posit—our field anew. (In addition to the delicate, silver-lined matrices of Preston Scott Cohen and Diller + Scofidio's seminal Slow House, a chief by-product of visual studies was alliteration—that, too, beginning with *Vision and Visuality.*)

Without Foster's editorial accuracy and introductions, his antholo-

[2] Now the tables have turned, or at least leveled, as Foster and Colomina co-direct the Media and Modernity program at Princeton.

[3] I went so far as to use a Foster quote for an epigraph when exhibiting my portfolio at SCI-Arc: "Here the artist poses as the Defiler of Civilization… Like the feces that is the first gift of the infant, this 'subversion' is intended to please rather more than upset." Hal Foster, *Recodings: Art, Spectacle Cultural Politics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1985), 40.

gies would have been opaque to nonspecialists. His savvy for intellectual curation and explication carries over into his own writing, sometimes threatening to overshadow his voice as a critic. The implications of an artist's work within a larger frame of reference often seem to interest Foster more than interrogating discrete works of art themselves. His *Recodings,* a collection of essays from 1985, is a personal favorite, and a precursor to both his writing on architecture and later art criticism in *Return of the Real* (1996) and now, *Bad New Days. Recodings* is both a meditation on the waning potential of the postmodernity Foster had helped inaugurate, as well as an early, less doctrinaire speculation on how various disciplines—art, film, architecture, advertising—were all coming to vie for the public realm as the twentieth century wound down. Speculative in the best sense, Recodings records Foster's uncertainties in the face of epochal change, a grasping for parameters in a world soon to lose the East–West dyad of the Cold War. As he foreshadowed then and reaffirms now, "After the events of 1989, especially the fall of the Berlin Wall and the uprisings at Tiananmen Square, there was some optimism about the possibility of a new Europe and a new world order…there was also a boom in architectural projects and art markets." That optimism, however, would prove illusory, as he continues, "in retrospect, 1989 represents the full dominance of neoliberalism more than anything else, which is to say an assault on the modern social contract, with welfare slashed, unions attacked, health care gutted, income inequalities promoted, and so on." [4]

It is to these bad new days he turns now. [5] The new collection opens soon after *Recodings* left off, with a reprint of Foster's pivotal treatment of Abject Art. He begins not with the shit shows of Mike Kelly or Paul McCarthy but with the less likely example of Cindy Sherman, whose many staged self-representations—specifically those unrelated to her more iconic simulations of stage and screen personae—devolve from the obscene and *informe* to the abjected—that is, literally cast out. (In Sherman's terminal work in this case, *Untitled #190* of 1989, an eyeball ejected from its host floats in bloody stew.) From these, Foster extracts a tripartite model for understanding Sherman's project, and by extension a host of far less subtle abnegations by other artists who followed. In the abject, Foster sees the *lingua franca* of Minimalism and its aftermath becoming a *lingua trauma* of the contemporary artist-as-victim. A turning point in both global art practices and in Foster's own grasp of postmodernity, the abject tendencies he grappled with in the late '90s run counter to many of the ocular-centric interests he represented (and that Sherman then typified) so effectively in the '80s. Though it began in a renewed fascination with visual systems—perspective, orthographic projection, ocular mechanics themselves—visual studies was for some simply a codification and celebration of the white male gaze. Foster even suggests that artists in the abject tradition could gather under the banner "Visuality and Its Discontents." [6]

This is the first of five categories organizing *Bad New Days,* and the only text to predate 2000. The other four themes are a cool quartet by comparison: archival, mimetic, precarious, and post-critical, to the last of which Foster appends a telltale question mark. Architects will likely be drawn most to the "Archival" and "Mimetic" chapters, though perhaps those just entering the field will favor the earnestness of "Precarious" or the debunking Foster performs in "Post-Critical?"

[4] Foster, *Recodings,* 3.

[5] The title of Foster's new book is, in fact, borrowed from Bertolt Brecht's "Against Georg Lukács," published in *New Left Review,* vol. 1, no. 84 (March–April 1974), 50.

[6] Foster, *Bad New Days* (New York: Verso Books), 21.

The chapter on archival practices is surprisingly catholic in its range. The idiosyncratic collecting and re-showcasing of Pierre Huyghe, Tacita Dean, and Sam Durant flesh out a chapter largely devoted to Thomas Hirschhorn's packing tape and cardboard altars and memorials. Though all of these practices clearly operate in the wake of Gerhard Richter's Atlas archive and the rigors of the Hilla and Bernd Becher's industrial archaeologies, those more systematic documentary practices are rote precursors to the more subjective auto-curation that Foster finds now. The current archival impulse works in tandem with a renewed urge toward the narrative: collecting and research here serve to revitalize an unlikely set of historical correspondences, which may or may not clarify an artist's personal development or point of view on the figure, time, or place portrayed in that archival purloining.

The next chapter on mimesis, the strongest of the lot, opens with a haunting description of an installation by Robert Gober, followed by a revelatory survey of Isa Genzken's underappreciated (at least in the United States) oeuvre. In the 1980s, Foster developed a nuanced language for describing simulation in the arts, and here he extends that idiom to explain more unsettling orders of falsification and shape-shifting. Genzken's range of media and associations tend to confound those coming to her work from a greater familiarity with her contemporaries Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke, but Foster unpacks her fearless, almost pathological worldview as an apt distillation of her times, and the truest echo of the Zurich Dada often invoked in *BND.* Her "Fuck the Bauhaus" opus, a series of haphazard yet beautiful *combines* that threaten to collapse at any moment, should be a required encounter for anyone contemplating a career in a visual medium in this century. "Mimetic" also includes the remarkable structures of John Kessler, elaborate technological totems with titles taken from box-office disasters like *Heaven's Gate.* Tellingly, and winningly, Kessler is the only artist called an "architect" in *Bad New Days.* [7] Would that he were one.

Foster's next turn in "Precarious" is devoted entirely to Thomas Hirschhorn, and to the larger sociocultural and political contexts addressed by his work. Developed at a nexus—would Foster claim a praxis?—of aesthetic, economic, and political engagement, Hischhorn's shrines, dioramas, fragments, and environments all partake of the same utopia-against-utopianism. Each construct is dedicated to a lesser or greater light of the twentieth century left and includes an informal library of reference texts by which to glean each call to arms. Long before it was fashionable (or otherwise) to "occupy" or to acknowledge a post-2008 *precariat* of underemployed, overlooked workers throughout the developed and developing world, Hirschhorn sought to reach those without enough art in their lives with projects that would both illuminate power relations and include—and thus reify—the labor of the underserved and underrepresented. Through the boom years of the 1990s and early aughts, Hirschhorn was an outlier, somewhere between the punk inflections of Raymond Pettibon and maybe the *Sturm und Drang* of Anslem Kiefer. These comparisons might not flatter Hirschhorn, but they bring his work into a frame-of-art practice rather than the more nebulous—precarious?—category of cultural action.

Hirschhorn is this volume's Richard Serra, the primary protagonist in both Foster's archival and precarious registers, and clearly a model of

[7] Foster, *Bad New Days,* 74.

Jon Kessler, *Heaven's Gate,* 2004. Courtesy of the artist.

creative integrity for the author. If Serra was a tough (but just?) dessert for most architects at the end of *A-A Complex,* Hirschhorn would be a pill doubly hard to swallow (though, it should be noted, Foster is making no such demand here). Architecture without architects in the most populist and rudimentary sense (or perhaps more exactly installationism-against-design, *tout court*), the UPS trash-heap aesthetics of Hirschhorn's altars are central to their polemic, and relentless in their deployment. Craft, precision, and skill—attributes under assault in all but Foster's mimetic category—are most forcefully rejected by Hirschhorn, a former graphic designer. If the Cal-Arts Abject crew, from Kelly and McCarthy through Durant, are messy because their traumas were (or because their immediate precursors were not), Hirschhorn's refusal of facility and exactitude is more total. Here, all virtuosities and most competencies are expelled as the residue of unjust differentials in education, training, and disciplinary familiarity. Foster explains why Hirschhorn matters, but that doesn't make it easier to embrace his generous but self-righteous and deeply ugly work. Its radical, accidental aformality is probably its best hook, but the actual shapes and spaces created by Hirschhorn seem beside the point to Foster.

The six chapters of *Bad New Days* read as four more evenhanded treatments and two emphatically cautionary episodes. Chapter five "Post-Critical?" and a stand-alone conclusion, "In Praise of Actuality," both illustrate the saying that the best defense is a strong offense. "Post-Critical?" describes less an aesthetic disposition (as it actually might in architecture, per Sylvia Lavin

and Robert Somol [8]) than what Foster sees as a renunciation of responsibility and content in the art world. Though Foster "understands the fatigue with critique, even the aversion to it, that many express today, for it can feel oppressive in its correctness when not defeatist in its negativity," he rebuts the disaffected *au courant* models of Latour, Rancière and others as naive and fetishistic. [9] In an barb that might be equally leveled at theories of OOO (object-oriented ontology), animating many architecture schools today, Foster notes dryly that, "the apparent liveliness of things should not be confused with the actual liveliness of people." [10] "In Praise of Actuality" reads as a continuation of "Post-Critical?" in its disavowals of many more gallery-friendly artists such as Jeff Koons, Mathew Barney, and Rirkrit Tiravanija. The recent reenactments of Marina Abramović's historical actions by herself and others leave Foster deeply uncomfortable with the zombie spectacle of reheated performance art.

[8] See Lavin's Crib Sheets, and Somol's "12 Reasons to Get Back into Shape," as well as Somol and Sarah Whiting's "Notes on the Doppler Effect." For a fuller spectrum (including Michael Speaks, Somol, Lavin, and importantly, Dave Hickey), see George Baird, "Criticality and Its Discontents," in *Harvard Design Magazine,* no. 21 (Fall/Winter 2004). I'm indebted to Todd Gannon for some of this background. He asks, and I include his question for others to ponder, "Now that you have me thinking in initials, is there something to be done with all these P-Cs—Paranoid Critical, Post-Critical, Politically Correct, and, inserted chronologically between the first two, the Personal Computer?"

[9] Foster, *Bad New Days,* 119.

[10] Foster, *Bad New Days,* 121.

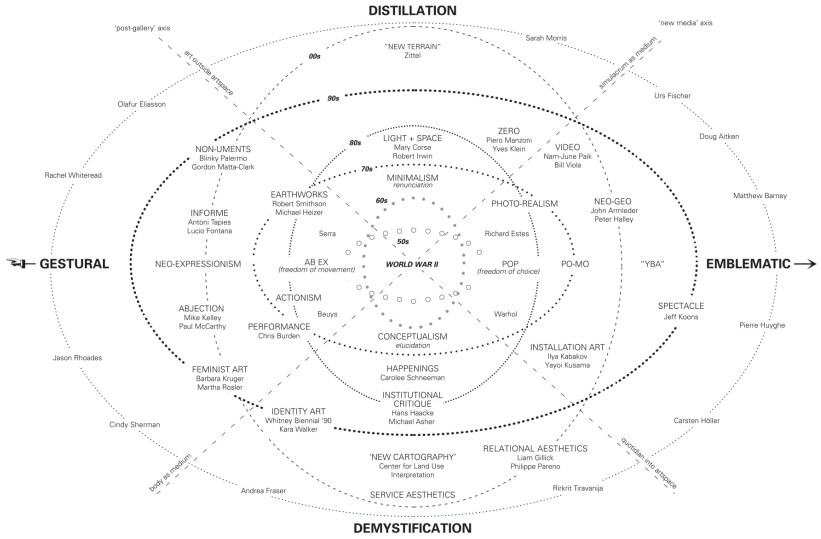
> "OF COURSE ARCHITECTS OPERATE IN THE VISUAL ARENA TOO, AND CAN HARDLY BE BEGRUDGED FOR DOING SO, BUT…"
>
> —HAL FOSTER [11]

[11] Hal Foster in "After the White Cube," in *London Review of Books,* vol. 37, no.6 (March 2015): 25–6, link.

To the two anecdotes that opened this review, a third aside: After the Venice Biennale of 2007, which alternates years between art and architecture, the late Zaha Hadid lamented to a friend, "The art years have far better parties, of course, but then Hirst's diamond skull could have paid for the entire biennale last year…" [12]

[12] To Hernan Diaz Alonso in conversation, circa 2009.

Read from an architectural oblique, *Bad New Days* has two "tells." The first is a repetitive circumscription, but not rejection, of the avant-garde project. Foster states at least three times that the avant-garde project can no longer hope to transgress a given order or legislate a new one but must find consolation and new possibilities for an *immanent critique* to be found in the "tracing fractures…within the given order" (see pages 4, 17, and 95). Architects suffer more profoundly than visual artists from a fantasy of perennial neo-vanguardism, and Foster's refusal of both transgression and novel formations as viable ambitions strikes at core fictions for each new generation in our field.



Joe Day, "Post-Atomic Art, or Contemporary Art for Architects," 2007.

Foster's second tic is a constant, but perhaps more subconscious, recourse to Marcel Duchamp to explain each of his thematics. He cites Duchamp in all but one of his chapters to clarify what forms these critiques might take, without however, embracing Duchamp's project wholesale. Thus, in the chapter on the abject, the "Chocolate Grinders" underwrite an aesthetics of fecal abasement; the tableau morte of *Étant Donnés* is a point of origin for Robert Gober's installation in the mimetic; Duchamp's later "part objects" (?) are invoked in "Post-Critical" and his theories of audience participation or a viewer's "completion of the work" animate the concluding chapter's plea for actuality. But Duchamp's distance and wry nominalism seem as troubling to Foster as they were to the Minimalists and Conceptualists who once bridled at constant comparisons to his work. [13] Architects (and California artists) have been less reticent in acknowledging their Duchampian debts. Both tells—the bounding of avant-garde possibility and the elision of Duchamp's more open-ended, not to say optimistic, potential—speak more to the station of art criticism at the moment than to the high-flux state of art, or of architecture. Foster lists some faults of criticality but misses perhaps the most damning: the false reassurances of pessimism. Perhaps we haven't seen it all yet.

[13] Marcel Duchamp appears in *Bad New Days,* 21, 68, 90, 121, and 133–134.

Foster owes his step-discipline a more subtle connoisseurship. Architects are often boorish, heavy-handed, and opportune in their dealings with fine art and artists, but it is no longer the case that they always have the upper hand in exchanges of culture or capital. And with that demotion has come considerable introspection. Foster is especially tone-deaf to US architects Frank Gehry and Peter Eisenman, finding little but empty signification and spectacle in their work, without acknowledging that they and their progeny have extended formalism, in Greenberg's sense as much as Colin Rowe's, further and more systematically than most of their peers in contemporary art (including the younger Serra, with whom both architects had contentious collaborations; more apt parallels for Gehry and Eisenman, in terms of generation, creative evolution, and scope of influence within their field would be Frank Stella and Sol LeWitt, respectively). [14] To pass judgment on recent architecture based on its most prolific practitioners, Foster and Piano, et al., would be akin to rendering a verdict on contemporary art based solely on the work of artists he deigns not to consider: Koons, Kapoor, or perhaps Chihuly. Frankly, at that level of market embrace, the architects are easier to defend.

[14] For Eisenman, see Foster, *Recodings,* 131–3; and for Gehry, see Foster, *The Art-Architecture Complex* (London and New York: Verso), 13–15.

Many of Foster's constraints as a theorist of architecture stem from a single philosophical misalignment between fields, an offset he would likely acknowledge. For all its diversification in terms of media and setting over the last fifty years, fine art remains vastly and resolutely *presentist*. A work of art is what is shown, published, or at least recorded and generally does not include the preparation or documentation that proceed that object or event as intrinsic to the work itself (Institutional Critique and a few strands of documentary conceptual practice would be the exceptions that prove the rule, some of which factor in Foster's "Archive" chapter). Works of architecture are by contrast often far more influential *in their absence,* as "paper" architecture, polemical illustrations, models, renderings, or, historically, simply as drawings. These representations were the terrain that used to constitute the overlap between art and architecture, a redoubt that gallerists Max Protetch and Henry Urbach were the last to defend. Phenomenological effects are suspect in architecture, even

as they remain crucial to many artists working in installation and new media. On the other hand, the viability of formalism has persisted in architecture long after it was set aside by artists. (That persistence is why architects forgive Stirling, a formal progenitor, for missing the Beuys in his lobby but mock the more derivative Meier in his tiff with Irwin.)

But, OK, even within an "only the work at hand" limitation, there are quite a few architect–artists, or the opposite, practicing now that deserve Foster's attention, and that might refute his skepticism. Francois Roche and An Te Liu spring to mind, as do many architects prefiguring or recomputing the intuitions of their artist peers: Ball-Nogues is better than the Starn Bros. at the same game. He might also consider more traditional "visionary" designers such as the still prolific Peter Cook, Hernan Diaz-Alonso, Jimenez Lai, and, glaringly, Neil Denari. [15] From the art world deploying architecture, there are usual suspects like Olafur Eliasson, Urs Fischer, Rachel Whiteread, and Doug Aitken, most of whom Foster touches on here or elsewhere, but also less heralded and more subtle provocateurs like Langlands & Bell, Patrick Lakey, Sarah Morris, and Steve McQueen—the latter well-known for his direction of *12 Years a Slave* but less so for his life-imperiling early work involving building collapse.

For artists and architects committed to a cross-pollination between disciplines, and for the many more who lapse into borrowing from other fields without heed, Foster's scholarship is a much-needed tonic. *Bad New Days* is a model of clarity brought to bear on a truly perplexing quarter century of art practices—a model that I hope Foster and others will try to extrapolate as he has before, into even less wieldy worlds of environmental conjecture in art's neighboring domains.

[15] Diller Scofidio + Renfro require forty-three lines in the index of *A-A Complex* simply to list the pages on which they appear, while Denari is omitted entirely—rather like an in-depth survey of Gordon Matta-Clark's work without a reference to Robert Smithson.