volume 8

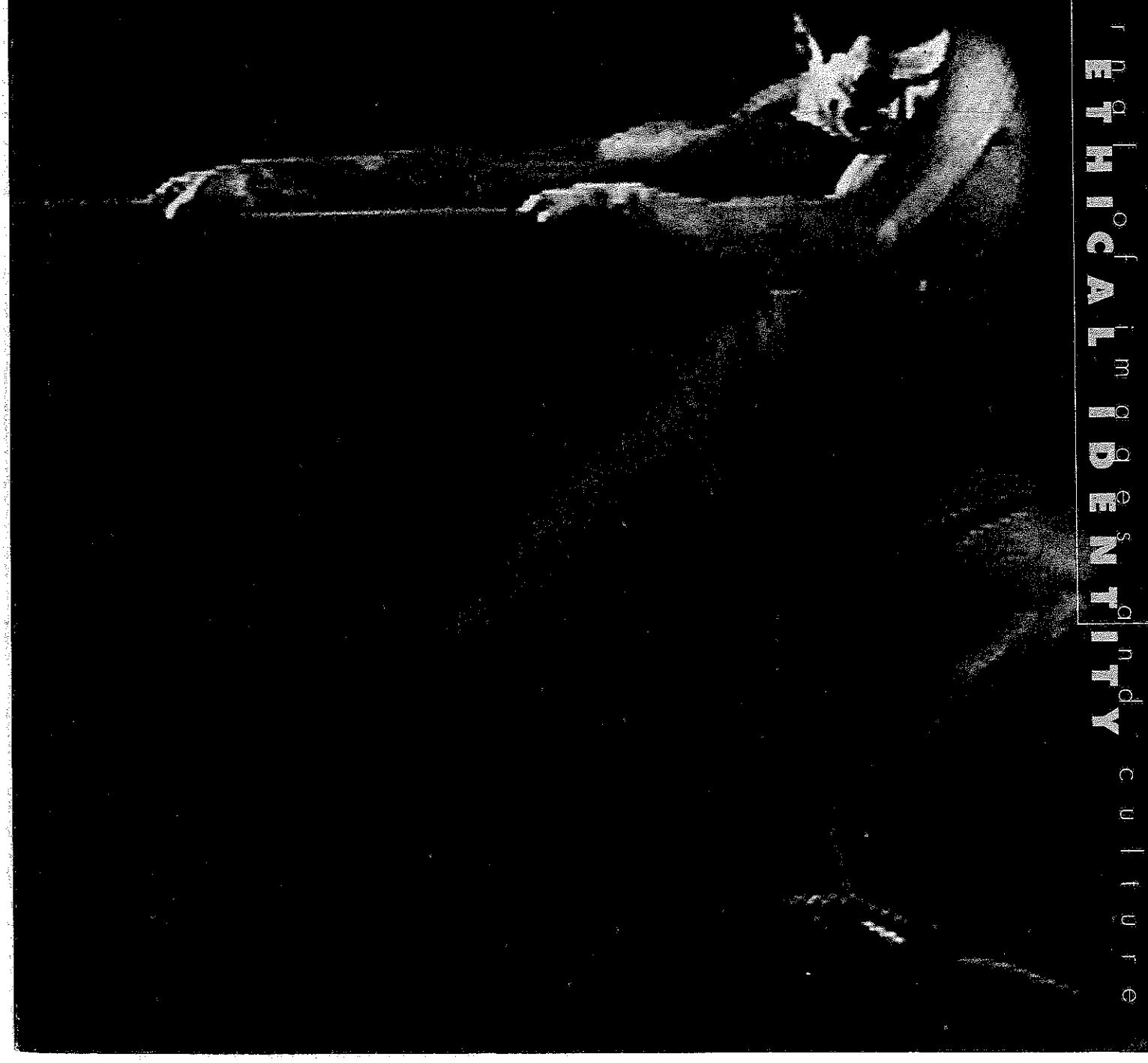
issue 1 1996

FRAME-WORK

$9

the journal of image and culture

ETHICAL IDENTITY



The haptic critic 2

Laura U. Marks

Several times in my work as a critic, I've found that something I initially loved and raved about comes back to haunt me in a barely recognizable form–in a hardened, exaggerated, disfigured version of itself. What a feeling of dismay, when it looks like what so moved me and others before, but the life is gone. I'm sure you have had the same experience: you notice something new and exciting and begin to try to name it, and then as soon as you have, the name lifts off the object and takes on a life of its own. For example, look at the way some of us got excited about the productive tension between image and text, and suddenly so many texts were spewing around that there was no time to look at the pictures. Or the way multiculturalism began as an exciting political movement but soon became the name of a policy for managing cultural difference. You can think of your own example of cultural haunting.

As critics and general participants in culture, what is our ethical stance toward our object, the life of culture that we hope to perceive clearly but not smother with our observations? How can we keep looking for the sources of life in what we observe, and avoid getting stuck on, and perpetuating, the forms? I have one idea, which I pray does not turn into its own ossified object. Consider haptic criticism.

Haptic criticism is a kind of criticism that assumes a tactile relation to one's object–one of touching, more than looking. The notion of the haptic is sometimes used in art to refer to a lack of visual depth, so that the eye travels on the surface of an object rather than move into illusionistic depth. I prefer to describe haptic visuality as a kind of seeing that uses the eye like an organ of touch. Pre-Socratic philoso-

phers thought of perception in terms of a contact between the perceived object and the person perceiving. According to Democritus, vision is not an event that happens in the eye but a contact in the air between object and beholder: moisture in the air carries the object to your eyes. Hence the haptic: looking, we touch the object with our eyes. This image might be a rather painful one, calling up raw, bruised eyeballs scraping against the brute stuff of the world. But I mean it to call up a way of seeing that challenges the conventional dynamic between looker and looked-at, in which the violence is thought to be done by the former to the latter. When the distance between the two is closed, the contact is more of a tactile one, a caress—but because the distance is shorter, it is also possible that the looked-at can hurt the looker. This is the risk of haptic visuality, and of haptic criticism.

Optical visuality, seeing things from enough distance to perceive them as distinct forms, depends on separation, on the viewing subject being separate from the object. We need it—to drive a car, to form judgments, to assess ourselves in the mirror, to build complicated theories of representation. But suppose we suspend for a moment the idea that this distance is always the case and always necessary. Our lover's skin seen an inch away becomes its own absorbing world, its gleam and pores and tiny hairs playing a delicate game of bas-relief. The thick presence of the Los Angeles sky, colored rose and sienna and slate by water droplets and pollution, is both distant and brushing right against our eyes, nudging into our lungs. And of course the pleasure of going right up to a giant canvas or photograph until the forms dissolve and grain and texture move out toward us is a pleasure of haptic seeing.

What is haptic criticism, then? If criticism is observing something in order to form an opinion of it, haptic criticism observes, well, haptically, in close contact with its object. Haptic criticism is opposed to the notion that criticism bridges a chasm between a thing and its representation, or subject and object. It proposes a continuum between the two, with the possibility (or threat) of one becoming the other. The events that critics want to approach are endlessly complex and nuanced; their surfaces are rough, porous, spongelike. The surface of (written) criticism is words, words that shape into ideas. (Of course, criticism can take place in many media, with effects more or less similar to what I'm describing here about writing.) Written language is the process of attempting to translate events, conceived in the broadest possible way, into verbal expression. Our success is only asymptotic: at some point the words necessarily lift off the surface of the event and begin to do the things that words do best. Whether or not criticism is haptic, in touch with its object, is a question of the point at which the words lift off. Certain kinds of criti-

cism level the surface of the event by applying language to it crudely, rudely, as though there could be a one-to-one correspondence between the event and its verbal assessment. Haptic criticism keeps its surface rich and textured, so it can interact with things in unexpected ways. It has to be humble, willing to alter itself according to its object or other. It has to give up ideas when they stop touching the other's surface.

This is hard to do: we critics love our ideas; we cherish them and forget that they can become hard tools that chip at the surface of the other, or merely glance off it without ever touching. I once misread a passage by Eve Sedgwick in which she was calling for a multiplication of the number of axes we use to analyze culture, axes such as sexual difference, race, class. Instead of abstract measurements of longitude and latitude, I imagined crude steel axes used to chop experience up into tiny pieces. But to continue the metaphor, if we measure using lots of small, neat units of measurement, our activity becomes less of a hacking away and more of a sort of all-over tingling. Fractal algorithms supply a very good model for the act of haptic criticism, because rather than staying on a two-dimensional plane they become so complex that they build into depth, attaining dimensions of 2.1 or 2.2 or so. Fractals fill up the space between two hierarchically related elements. Haptic criticism similarly is so sensitive to its object that it takes on a multidimensional form of subtle complexity.

Optical seeing depends upon a center, a point in the brain (or is it the soul), where the object is reproduced (light carrying its image needle-like through the pupil). These elements allow us to make pinhole cameras of ourselves. We reproduce the results of our observations at a place called the self, deep within us, while our surface remains intact. In haptic seeing, all of our self rushes up to the surface to interact with another surface. When this happens there is a concomitant loss of depth—we become amoebalike, lacking a center, changing as the surface to which we cling changes. We cannot help but be changed in the process of interacting. We give up believing that meaning is formed after the fact, in our minds, and attribute power to create meaning to the interaction itself. In other words, we give up some of our power of self-determination in order to let the other transform us.

Our loss of center and the loosening of our subjectivity is thus a gain in "subjectivity" for the object. Is it tautologous to say that if we are transformed in the process of interaction with the object/the other, then it must be capable of wreaking changes in us? As our seeing comes more to the surface, the object begins to see us from its own depths. Of course this is the way haptic criticism might work if the thing one is

"criticizing" is, say, a pot, a film, a person, or a movement. But whatever the object, this kind of criticism renders it more of a "subject," more of a willful and charismatic force. Haptic criticism assumes that its object has aura–that it relates to me, looks back at me.

The ethical dilemma of haptic criticism is that the critic has to give up her preconceived ethics, and to some degree herself, in order to engage with her object. For example, I might have to suspend my feminist ideas in order to respect the priorities of women in a culture different from my own, or to give up my idea of what is beautiful in order to get my head around something new and strange. It is frightening to lose one's center, and it introduces a kind of schizophrenia to give up passionately held beliefs in order to be transformed by the thing one interacts with. What if I find out too late that I don't want to be transformed in this way? How will I deal with comments that I have become shallow, or scattered, or–horrors–have lost my politics?

There's no guarantee that I won't have to deal with these problems. I may have to move back, establishing optical distance, from time to time, just to see what I have become. I may be unpleasantly surprised and have to spend a few months squirreling away a new world view. But let me recall that what I'm calling haptic criticism has long antecedents in other sorts of relationships. For many people the most important guide to ethical action is not morals, which are located deep within the self, but context–the space between the self and the immediate object. We have a tradition of losing ourselves in our object, and when we find our selves again they might be completely different.

Stay close.

◐

Laura U. Marks is a writer and curator. This year she is a Mellon/Pew Fellow in the School of Critical Studies at California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, California.