The following brief essay appeared at the end of a book, which was itself the end of a book series. I edited the series, which discussed seven different themes in art theory. At the end I felt odd: I realized I’d learned a lot about the seven subjects, but I was more interested in the failures of the books than their successes. I wasn’t surprised that each volume (each on a different subject) had failed to reach consensus. After all, the art world is full of divergent, diverse opinions. What attracted my attention was the way each volume had failed, and how their failures were different.

The result was this short essay, which I put at the end of the last book in the series, ruminating on the strange apparently unrelated failures. I thought the readers of Practices of Theory might be interested in this, because it shows that the art world is much more than simply, merely, pluralist. Our theory is in much deeper disarray, and that disarray is not itself noticed or articulated. Nevertheless, if something like the condition I describe here is true, then it may not make sense to continue to produce art theories that are intended to be generally applicable or useful, because the polyphony of voices has reached the point where no one theory will appear plausible.

(Note: it’s necessary to know that each book in the series, called The Art Seminar, has a transcribed conversation, called a seminar, followed by brief essays by invited writers, called assessments.)

It isn’t customary for series editors to write something at the end of the series, but in this case the temptation is overwhelming. This series has been a fascinating experience. The idea was to invite a wider range of contributors on each subject than had been assembled in the past, in order to reveal the new diversity of art discourse. I was impelled in the first instance by a growing sense that certain models of poststructuralist criticism were no longer making headway with some of the crucial concepts of art. In particular I wanted to move away from the kind of art theory that has been practiced since the 1960s, in which the contributors to conferences and edited volumes are all roughly agreed on the protocols of interpretation, so that despite appearances of dialectic and disagreement, all that actually remains is
to investigate agreed-upon problems in an increasingly formulaic manner. I wanted
to open the way to a more divergent and flexible discourse.
The structure of the series was intended to maximize open-endedness: my role in
these volumes has been to help pick the panelists in the roundtables, and to try to
moderate in such a way that the panelists’ concepts, methodologies, and purposes
are as clear as possible. Preparing the transcribed *Art Seminars* was an excruciating
process. I did all the transcriptions myself, and then each panelist was invited to edit
his or her own contributions and add new comments, resulting in multiple drafts
and revisions. But when the transcripts were complete, my involvement effectively
ended. I chose some of the people who wrote Assessments and Afterwords, but
my co-editors and the panelists themselves came up with most of the names. No
one edited what the Assessors wrote, so there was no way to control the form or
direction of the books. Each book was meant to reflect the disarray of its subject
as accurately and thoroughly as possible.

When the series was planned, I imagined that the books would be full of concerted
critical encounters in the manner of, say, *Critical Inquiry*, but more wide-ranging.
I expected contributors to argue with the panelists’ positions, developing and ex-
tending the conversation. I thought the panelists’ questions would be sharpened,
their assumptions undermined, their frames broken, their ideologies revealed – all
the usual elements of intellectual discourse.

What happened was of a different order. Instead of disagreements, these volumes
are full of contributions that choose to ignore not only specific claims and influential
scholars, but also entire disciplines and schools of interpretation. The Assessors talk
past one another, and past the panelists, carrying on different conversations and
creating divergent discourses that cannot be compared or adjudicated.

Here are examples from each volume. (The descriptions of volumes 1 through 4 are
paraphrased from an exchange published at the end of volume 4; these comments
do not reflect the opinions of my co-editors in these books.)

Volume 1, *Art History versus Aesthetics*, has a particularly wild roundtable conversa-
tion. Afterward, Arthur Danto said it was like herding cats. Yet the sources of that
wildness, and the kinds of misunderstandings between art history and aesthetics,
were clearly articulated. In that respect the book is very arguable; it is largely po-
sible to compare the different positions its contributors take. Danto, Jay Bernstein,
Thierry de Duve, and many others in that book argue very sharply and it is not hard
to discover productive points of disagreement. Of the books it is the least like the
model I am proposing.

Volume 2, *Photography Theory*, has deep disagreements about what a theory of
photography might be, and some pitched arguments between Joel Snyder and
Rosalind Krauss about Peirce’s concept of the indexical sign. Some people who
wrote Assessments for that book seemed completely to miss the point of trying to
articulate a theory of photography at all. They talk about other things instead, and
there’s the argument – which Walter Benn Michaels dismisses in a footnote – that
you shouldn’t try for a theory of something like photography that isn’t a single
subject. (Michaels says of course you should.) Other contributors misunderstand the claims about indexicality in often definable ways. But most contributors choose not to join the debate except in passing, and a number do not say why they do not have a position on indexicality, and also do not say why they think it is unimportant that they do not have a position.

Vol. 3, *Is Art History Global?* raises some very serious questions to do with whether art history is Western, and how one might think outside the boundaries of Western historical thinking. As in volume 1, the species of disagreements in volume 3 are themselves well defined. For instance there is David Summers’s position that Western concepts can be made capacious enough to address experiences of art across many cultures. Against that there are doubts about how universal art experiences are, how limiting Western languages and metaphysics might be, and how blinding Western institutions might be. As in the first volume, the problematic is not about to be resolved, but the species of disagreement are themselves agreed upon. A deeper disagreement, however, is scarcely broached: it would be between those who think that local ways of writing art history are helpfully diverse but potentially legible as art history, so that local practices will appear as contrasts within a larger discursive field; and those who feel, or hope, that no such legibility exists. That divergence of opinion is implicit in contrasts between people’s arguments, but the book does not directly provide material that would allow the question to be developed.

Volume 4 (*The State of Art Criticism*) is incoherent in a different way. For example there is an enormous range of ideas here about whether art criticism has a history. For some people, like Dave Hickey, art criticism’s history is comprised of whatever creative writers the critic likes. (Hickey names Hazlitt, DeQuincey, Dickens, Wilde, and others.) For others, like Steve Melville, by its very nature art criticism doesn’t have a history, because it depends on the individual act of judging. The range of ideas about whether art criticism has a history is itself much broader than the range of opinion about, say, the index in photography, or aesthetic terms in art history. It is a deeper incoherence. And *The State of Art Criticism* harbors an even more difficult difference, which most every contributor notices but hardly any think is worth pursuing: the difference between critics who see their purpose as rendering judgment, and those who take art criticism as a place to meditate on the conditions under which critical judgments might be made. To me that is an astonishing gulf, and it is not bridged by anyone in the book.

Volume 5, *Renaissance Theory*, had an compact seminar conversation, which elicited Assessments that have a wide range of elisions. In the panel discussion, a principal theme was the lack of engagement of modernist art historians with possible Renaissance precedents, and the complementary lack of interest, on the part of Renaissance scholars, in modern artists’ responses to Renaissance art. That issue was hardly addressed in the Assessments, leaving the impression that a conceptual and institutional gulf might separate modernist from Renaissance art history. On a smaller scale, Georges Didi-Huberman was brought up in the Art Seminar, but scarcely mentioned in the Assessments. (Excepting one Assessment, which was
intended as an embodiment of Didi-Huberman’s approach.) A number of the Assess-
ments keep closely to the contributors’ own specialties, so that their responses to
the Art Seminar are often only implicit. There is relatively little direct engagement
with the Art Seminar in the book. My feeling, overall, is that Renaissance studies
is somewhat isolated from other branches of art history, and that its isolation is
not comparable to the relations between other specialties: the Renaissance has an
inbuilt reason for its disconnections.

Volume 6, *Landscape Theory*, sports a mass of disagreements and indecisions on
fundamental issues. At the beginning of our panel discussion, we quickly agreed
that landscape is not only ideological. But that led us immediately into a wonderful
confusion. What is landscape, aside from ideology? There were as many answers as
there were panelists in the Art Seminar. The same thing happened when we talked
about the role of aesthetics, and again when the subject was space and time in
landscape, the connection of landscape and representation, landscape and subjec-
tivity, and landscape and place. I counted seventeen terms, any of which could be
regarded as fundamental, on which there was little agreement. Of the volumes in
the series, *Landscape Theory* is the most like a contestation of philosophies built
on incompatible premises.

Volume 7, *Re-Enchantment*, is potentially the widest-ranging of the series, and that
is why it is last. As you will have discovered reading this book, the fundamental
issues at stake, such as the presence or absence of religious meaning and the very
definitions of fine art, are contested among an unusual range of writers, scholars,
and artists inside and outside academia. Despite David Morgan’s and my best ef-
forts, several scholars refused to participate in the book under any terms: the sign
of a field where dialectic exchange seems so remote a possibility that only refusal
remains.

What conclusions might be drawn from this? If the *Art Seminar* series is an indica-
tion, pluralism is not an adequate way to characterize the way art is currently con-
ceptualized. What happens in these books is more like a mixture of several kinds
of encounters: dialectic exchanges, *Critical Inquiry*-style, in which the operative
terms are shared and there is broad agreement about what constitutes the terms’
problematic or undefined elements; persistent misunderstandings that are not cor-
rected or meliorated by professional exchanges such as conferences or reviews; and
many individual refusals to come to terms with other people’s positions. Let me
call those three possibilities critical discussions, misunderstandings, and refusals.

The *Art Seminar* series suggests that critical discussions are not the bread and but-
ter of professional academic exchanges, as I think they are assumed to be: instead
they are the exception, and in some instances they are rare. The series also shows,
I think, that misunderstandings (the second kind of encounter) are more persistent
than they might be thought to be. A number of writers in the series show evidence
of misreadings that have not been effectively challenged, and are not likely to be
adequately addressed in the future – either because scholars lack the time for the
kind of extended engagements that could disabuse others of long-held interpreta-
tions, or because it can come to seem that entire interpretive projects and careers are founded on formative misreadings, which then become unrewarding topics of discussion. And the series shows, I think unarguably, that what I am calling refusals (the third kind of encounter) are very common, and in some cases the most prevalent sort of academic exchange. I am not criticizing these phenomena. For some contributors to this series, a state of affairs like the one I have sketched would call for concerted critical work. The idea would be to try to disentangle critical discussions, meliorate misreadings, and challenge refusals. But I think the art world is more or less immune to that kind of effort. That also means that art theory can no longer hope to produce the kind of loose critical consensus that surrounds the reaction to modernism epitomized by poststructuralism and October. It is a truism of poststructural criticism that the search for overarching theories should be abandoned, and at any rate consensus wasn’t one of the purposes of the Art Seminar. But the disarray I am describing here is different from the pluralism and anti-hegemonic interests associated with poststructuralism: this disarray is caused by lack of interest in sustained critical discussions. For me one of the discoveries of this series is an agnosticism in relation to argument, enabled by the conviction that critical discussion is always available, prevalent, potentially effective for anyone who might want it.
The second work, Tahât al-tahât (The incoherence of the incoherence), is a rebuttal to al-Ghazali by 12th-century Andalusian jurist and philosopher Ibn Rushd (Averroes), who argued that al-Ghazali undoubtedly erred at the expense of both religion and philosophy. In the treatise presented here, Khwajâzâdâh indirectly rebutted Ibn Rushd. Description. This philosophical treatise by 15th-century Ottoman theologian Mustafa ibn Yusuf al-Bursawi, better known as Khwajâzâdâh, is a rebuttal of a rebuttal. It is one of two treatises (the other is al-Dhakhirah [The hoard], a 13th-century work by ʻAlâ al-Din al-Tusi) that were commissioned by Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II, known as the Conqueror.