

## Negative Space

Cristín Leach

Merrion Press, 2022, 160 pp.

**CRISTÍN LEACH'S MEMOIR** *Negative Space* is a short and sharp account of the shock that can occur when a comfortably domestic life is revealed as the proverbial house-of-cards. Discovering her husband's infidelity, mother and art critic Leach experienced an identity crisis as the securities that shaped her life came undone with her marriage. She explores this crisis generally, and theoretically, as a dynamic between the visible and invisible; and, more particularly, as a disjuncture between appearances and the messy world of emotions – or feelings and sensation.

Departing from an anecdote about the pressures of meeting a journalistic rule to not write in the first person – and thus disavow felt experience – the book unfolds with analogies that explore the tensions and fragilities of limits, thresholds, and edges. Examples include thinking through sculptor Carl Andre's interest in how the space around an object can shape its form and meanings (hence the title, *Negative Space*); the author's travel to the top of a mountain to seek an isolated place to scream; and the recognition of how a sense of failure is relative to the depth of expectations. The tone of the book shifts between the aggressive, lyrical, and poignant – a map of the vexed and contradictory ways we manage crisis.

*Negative Space* is not a triumph-over-adversity narrative where all settles after a storm has passed but rather grapples with a profound aim: how to understand that the certainties we typically cling to in life are, well, anything but certain. As a writer and wife, words and marriage provided central significance to Leach's life but once one becomes very unstable, certainty is revealed as not a given but conditional and therefore any of its forms can be understood as holding the capacity to potentially falter. Further to the opening anecdote about the difficulty of dispelling subjectivity when writing art criticism, Leach talks about her professional failures as a creative writer, as if, as career options, criticism and 'creativity' need to be understood in opposition. In the only impersonal passages of the book, she writes of an Irish cultural attitude to marriage that no matter the relationship between the two people it should remain private, a marriage's secrets kept sacrosanct. This, harshly noted, is "because of the insatiable, ingrained misogyny the Irish state was founded on" – 'critical' and 'creative' writing are tenuous and arbitrary and the sexism of traditional ideals of marriage won't necessarily survive the social revolutions of divorce laws and recognition of same-sex partnership rights. The essential thrust of *Negative Space* is in the fact that Leach does not lose 'faith' in writing or marriage, regardless of how her certainties about these were shook, but instead reckons with all the surrounding forces that shaped what these entities can be, or what she believed them to be – and how, now, they can be imagined differently. As sketched, the examples run a range from her career and personal life, between accounts of what is left unsaid in published writing, an increased interest in the abstract qualities of music and sound, and speculative musings on the continuing influence of the author's ancestry. The book concludes with the hopeful insight that one can "keep re-making the future, each time it is left behind."

For all the range of experiences that Leach draws on and the different existential questions that unfold, *Negative Space* is unified by a preoccupation with physicality; images of bodies and sensations run throughout. Many of the reviews and other public responses to the book, to date, have congratulated its sheer visceral impact, succinctly described as "searingly intimate" on

the jacket blurb. But *Negative Space* should be more importantly valued for what it says about what art criticism conventionally *is* and *could be*, rather than taken as a confessional, feminine, 'memoir' of a particular life, which happens to be that of an art critic.

In *Hold it Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Duke University Press, 2013), American scholar Jennifer Doyle noted, like Leach, that art criticism as a general professional practice remains wary of the subjective and/or emotive. This is unlike literary criticism, where discussion and analysis of the possibility of diverse responses to text is established. And art criticism remains circumscribed in spite of the fact that, like literary criticism, strict normative judgement has long since been considered passé. But if a range of responses are potentially allowable, why is what Doyle broadly terms 'the sentimental' typically disavowed? From critics Clement Greenberg to Claire Bishop, sentimentality has been associated with vicariousness, 'fake' emotions and liberal goodwill, and thus allegedly displaces more complex understandings. But, like Doyle, Leach poses the question of how any critic can truly stand outside an emotional economy, honestly denouncing feelings and sensations as 'bad'.

Unlike much art writing, *Negative Space* understands that this is the critical matter of *relationships to*

*an artwork and not an intrinsic quality in art itself* – or, at least, this is what Leach's book provocatively and productively grapples with. The proximity required between a critic and artwork need not be a matter of coolly representing the ideas or feelings of one or the other, but allowing for an emotionally messy encounter that in crossing given limits and thresholds, and falling off edges, challenges us to re-think what we believe we already know about the experience of art.

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Portrait of Cristín Leach; photograph by Conor Horgan, courtesy the author and Merrion Press.