

ISSUES & COMMENTARY

Art Criticism, Bound to Fail

A critic confronts the inescapable limitations of writing about art and reflects on its pitfalls and privileges.

BY NANCY PRINCENTHAL

The object of only fitful attention, sometimes warm but mostly exasperated, art criticism is an orphan practice, and has grown up without consistent discipline of any kind. This lack of order, rules of conduct and fixed standards for measuring success have lately, again (there is periodicity to this), provoked some despair; the term “crisis” has been used. But it is no coincidence that art criticism’s laxity is exactly congruent with the freedoms celebrated in its subject. And if art is valued for exercising such spirited independence, why not the writing that addresses it?

Then and Now

As formulated in a 2001 *October* roundtable¹ and subsequently two years later in a short book by James Elkins called *What Happened to Art Criticism?*,² the causes for alarm echo concerns that go back at least four decades. They can be dated to the birth (in 1962) and striking rise to prominence of *Artforum*, which came in response to a widespread appetite for more rigorous and objective writing than that offered by other magazines at the time, especially *Artnews*, then dominated by a literary, poetic sensibility. So the young writers associated with *Artforum*, including Michael Fried, Rosalind Krauss and Barbara Rose, revived Clement Greenberg’s formalism as a systematic alternative to the impressionistic writing going on elsewhere. This is reviewed in Amy Newman’s fascinating oral history of the magazine,³ and also in Irving Sandler’s equally compelling recent memoir.⁴ These early *Artforum* writers ultimately turned against Greenberg, without abandoning their commitment to what they believe are verifiable systems of analysis—that is, to interpretations grounded in extra-artistic disciplines rather than subjective response.

In the roundtable convened by *October*, the academic redoubt where several defecting *Artforum* writers took refuge, the argument against “belletristic” writing was repeated, in just the same language as that of 1962. Peter Schjeldahl and Dave Hickey, very different critics though both are widely popular and both have backgrounds in literature (Schjeldahl as a poet, Hickey as a writer of fiction), were subject to particular skepticism. In the face of this hostility to carefully crafted writing, panel participant Robert Storr grew increasingly restive. Criticism, Storr said, may not necessarily be or even aspire to be literature, but it is a literary form.

Belles Lettres

The problem with the contest between defensible, systematic analysis and unapologetically writerly subjectivity is that it is now, and arguably was in the early 1960s too, a specious opposition. On the one hand, there is no self-evident reason to make the linkages between art and theory that have been argued over the past 20 years, productive and often fascinating though they have been. Semiotics, Lacanian psycho-

analysis, Marxist economic theory, structural anthropology—these are all fascinating fields, but they have neither more necessary nor sufficient relationships to visual art than do theology, or mathematics, or the physics of color (to name some heuristic precedents).

On the other hand, and more important I think, good fiction and poetry can be every bit as lean and incisive, and as informative about actual experience in the real world, as any cultural or political theory. Philosopher and classicist Martha Nussbaum contends that the falsehood of the art/theory dichotomy was understood even by the Greeks: “Indeed, epic and tragic poets were widely assumed to be the central ethical thinkers and teachers of Greece; nobody thought of their work as less serious, less aimed at truth, than the speculative prose treatises of historians and philosophers. Plato regards the poets . . .

as dangerous rivals . . . we do his arguments against tragedy serious injustice by taking the distinction between philosophy and literature for granted.”⁵

Relinquishing the distinction means admitting real discovery. The late Guy Davenport, fiction writer and literary critic, described the process of interpretation by way of analogy with a viewer looking into a stereopticon, where two irregular figures combine to produce a third—a perfect geometric form: “Successful criticism, it seems to me, is like the ghostly triangle in the stereopticon.”⁶ Sounding much like Davenport, poet and classicist Anne Carson observes, of the Greek poet Simonides, that his writing creates “a picture of things that brings visible and invisible together in the mind’s eye as one coherent fact. The coherence is a poetic conjuring but the fact is not. Together they generate a surplus value that guarantees poetic vocation against epistemological stinginess.”⁷ This surplus is what critics should dream of accruing.

Judgment

It is a more parsimonious economy, however, that many believe art criticism should practice; the complaint most frequently lodged against criticism today is that it seldom renders judgment. Instead of reaching a firm evaluation, it is said, critics almost always dwell on description.

One response comes from Peter Schjeldahl, who has said, “Precision of language is the best kind of judgment.” The quote appears in Elkins’s book on criticism⁸—oddly, without a footnote, though one of Elkins’s main objectives is a comparison between



Bruce Nauman: Bound to Fail, 1966, color photograph, 19 1/4 by 23 3/4 inches, from “Eleven Color Photographs,” 1966-67/1970. Courtesy Sperone Westwater, New York. © 2005 Bruce Nauman/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

criticism and art history. Favoring the second tradition, with its academic checks and balances and long-established norms, Elkins nonetheless dispenses in this slender and provocative book with any trace of the apparatus that distinguishes professional art-historical writing. It is a symptomatic omission. The relationships among art criticism, art history, literary criticism and cultural theory are in flux. In the U.S., there is a proliferation of postgraduate programs that offer degrees in critical and curatorial studies, though the curricula involved, and requirements for their mastery, are far from clear. In any case, it may well be that the academicization of criticism is partly responsible for the flight from judgment. Historians do not generally concern themselves with absolute or even relative assessments of their subjects; on the contrary, their discipline relies heavily on dispassionate (and seemingly indiscriminate) disinterment of artists long buried by mere opinion. Perhaps the squeamishness about passing judgment can also be associated, if reductively, with the Pyrrhic victory of postmodern theory; fixed standards and comprehensive explanatory systems are, of course, its primary targets.

But it remains true that critics are now more averse to confrontational writing than they were in previous decades. There is something strikingly anomalous about this condition, given the bitter rancor of political and cultural exchange in our country—and maybe that is also a partial explanation. In any case, it is certainly more efficient, and easier, now than ever before to pass judgment by choosing subjects, simply because the art world has grown so big. Inevitably, many current writ-

ers conclude that the strongest—and certainly easiest—act of judgment is deciding what to write about. In the 1950s, when at Irving Sandler's estimate the New York art community numbered 250 people, *Artnews* reviewed every show in a Manhattan gallery, in 50 words or less. Essentially, it was just enough space to put your thumb up or down.

To go back to roughly the same time—that is, the late 1950s and early '60s—there was (at least in part for the same reason) a sense of mutual engagement between artists and critics that has since considerably weakened. There is no current work comparable to Jasper Johns's indelible *The Critic Sees* (1961)—or to John Baldessari's text paintings of the later '60s, all of which are wittily preemptive of criticism. They did not exactly precipitate a crisis in art writing, but they did anticipate full-bore Conceptualism as a kind of elbowing out of the role of the critic. One considerable problem today is in a lack of *mutual* antagonism, or even energetic engagement. Artists are no more willing to take on

ported by the critical discussion, but not be its premise. Good criticism allows readers to make reasoned evaluations themselves.

Market Share

Running beneath the problem of judgment, and providing much of its force and persistence, is the question of power, especially as it is tied to money. In the *October* roundtable, Benjamin Buchloh remarked testily at one point, "you don't need criticism for an investment structure, you need experts."⁹ Agreeing with Buchloh on the distorting influence of financial concerns on art writing, Neo-Conceptual artist Andrea Fraser has made market analysis her subject in both her writing and her art. "I define criticism as an ethical practice of self-reflective evaluation of the ways in which we participate in the reproduction of relations of domination," Fraser said.¹⁰

That is a spiral that leads inward toward ever smaller, more trivial loops. Certainly there are more important political targets than art's system of distribution, even if that system is considered representative of other, broader economic structures. And just as certainly, art is better at other things than market analysis. Though Fraser's approach recommends itself as a form of unsparing self-reflection, rigorously Marxist and altogether without self-interest, in practice it is more than a little narcissistic, something like those "scathing" Hollywood movies about industry insiders that must seem wonderfully brave to their subjects but to the rest of us sink or swim on their accessibility as gossip. Peter Schjeldahl's quip at the height of the 1980s market boom, that art had become the sex life of money, surely goes far to explain the endurance of this mode of production.

But the question of which sector wields real influence in the art world—whether curators, dealers, collectors, journalists, critics or artists—has undeniably become a blinding preoccupation, and not to writers alone (Fraser is hardly the only artist whose work, altogether tautologically, is consumed by it). To be sure, squeamishness about the market is self-defeating. And since, as everyone knows, the great majority of art critics make very little money writing art criticism, there is the danger that a kind of sanctimony can creep into the practice. Disinterestedness is actually, in some ways, a handicap. Power can be a stern guide. But that does nothing to enhance its merit as subject.

At the same time, money is certainly not the only register of power. In response to Buchloh, Fraser and their supporters, Robert Storr eventually responded, "I find it curious that those currently engaged in critical activities (such as 'institutional critique') seem to think everything is fair game except the academy. It is a dubious exemption."¹¹ For sure. And in addition to academic prestige, other kinds of power, including simple fame, which is not always tied to wealth, merit at least as much consideration. Every writer needs to think about where her criticism is published, who reads it, and why. (These questions are addressed in some detail by Elkins.) There are mechanical considerations that come into decisions about contributing to a particular publication, mostly to do with how much information, or prior knowledge, can be presumed of its readers. But again, as such these issues don't command any deep or sustaining interest, for reader or writer.

Engagement between artists and critics has weakened. There is no current work comparable to Jasper Johns's indelible *The Critic Sees* or to John Baldessari's text paintings, which are wittily preemptive of criticism.

Précis

If not examining the circulation of power and money, and making judgments that affect its flow, what does criticism concern itself with? What exactly is its purpose? In the *October* roundtable, George Baker described himself as an explorer, and Rosalind Krauss said that her role as she sees it includes "scanning the horizon for some new blip." Hal Foster identified four functions for critics: the archeological, exploratory, paradigm-making and mnemonic. Speaking in Amy Newman's *Artforum* history, Peter Plagens noted three types of critics: evangelists, cartographers and goalies. The first are proselytizers who write only to eagerly promote their favorite work, the second are dedicated to describing the lay of the land, and the third are critics who say of themselves, "It's going to have to be pretty good to get by me."¹² Most of these job descriptions involve identifying merit (surely a form of judgment) and finding category headings for its new instances. There is a vaguely colonial feeling to almost all of them—of bold explorers setting sail, conquering new worlds, mapping what they've found, converting the unenlightened, setting up rules of governance, substantiating the pedigree of the elect, and, finally, regulating the admission of newcomers.

What's missing is a notion of criticism as substantive and active dialogue with working artists. (Irving Sandler comes close in his self-description, in the title of his 2003 memoir, as *A Sweeper-Up After Artists*, but so humbly as to risk all critical prerogative; happily, this hobbling diffidence is not sustained in his writing.) Raphael Rubinstein's essay about criticism, "A Quiet Crisis" [see *A.i.A.*, Mar. '03] addresses a gaping omission in the *October* roundtable, which is reference to much actual artwork, painting in particular. Whatever critics do, our primary responsibility is to come to terms with the work at hand, accounting (if possible) for its maker's intention, its shaping context and history, and its network of plausible associations. A presumption should be made that the artwork has meaning and effect, and that those qualities inhere before the first curatorial or critical or marketing decisions are brought to bear. The guiding question shouldn't be, why write criticism, but why make art? Sorting out the answer is where the privilege—which is immense—of being a critic lies. To participate in that dialogue, and find oneself involved in formative discussions about how art is conceived, is an honor and a powerful incentive.

One other thing crucial to writing criticism is acknowledging that art, like writing, is undertaken for many, many reasons. No literate person would exclude, on principle, fiction, history, scientific

WHAT IS PAINTING

DO YOU SENSE HOW ALL THE PARTS OF A GOOD PICTURE ARE INVOLVED WITH EACH OTHER, NOT JUST PLACED SIDE BY SIDE? ART IS A CREATION FOR THE EYE AND CAN ONLY BE HINTED AT WITH WORDS.

John Baldessari: What is Painting, 1966-68, acrylic on canvas, 68 by 55 1/2 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

critics than the reverse.

I've done a fair amount of writing about public art, and also about artists' books, which both present distinctive challenges to criticism, not least by occupying some of the terrain it generally claims for itself—the presumption of speaking both to and on behalf of the "public," however that is defined, and, in the case of the artists' books, the incorporation, often, of text. As it happens, there is a paucity of writing about both these kinds of artwork, and the lack of dialogue is frustrating to both sides. Attention is what's needed; its absence is indeed a very effective evaluation.

Nonetheless, and, it seems to me, crucially, judgment is simply not the most important thing a critic does. The question of whom, and what, a categorical judgment serves has no clear answer. It does not necessarily help articulate the premises of the work, or contribute to its development. Rather, it tends to shut down fruitful discussion. Judgment should be sup-

reporting or political analysis from the field of writing. Few curious and engaged readers (and increasingly few writers) restrict themselves to a single genre, particularly since each enriches the understanding of others. The same is true of the myriad modes of contemporary visual art. Art as a practice is becoming ever more diversified. Understanding any of it demands comparable flexibility and range, and although this seems too obvious to need saying, many critics righteously insist on allegiance to narrow bands of the spectrum, denouncing others categorically (painting, for instance, is a frequent target).

Difficulty

Embracing this diversity is a good way of avoiding predetermined theoretical frameworks. It also helps prevent recourse to jargon; the unnecessary use of specialist terminology, affectations that derive from French-to-English translations, and unjustified neologisms are among the most disheartening aspects of much theoretically oriented critical writing. Ironically, they dispel the joys of the unfamiliar that are among the highest pleasures of compelling new art.

Here fine distinctions need to be made. In critical writing, clarity is, I think, close to an ethical imperative: it enfranchises readers. The possibility of engaging public attention and the responsibilities thus entailed are forfeited by writing that is deliberately obscure. On the other hand, opacity—form that calls attention to itself—has an important, even an essential place in both visual and verbal invention. And if there is one thing essential to criticism, it is recogniz-

ing art's resistance to verbal summary. What matters most about visual art, in the end, is that it's visual, that it always involves an essential quality that exceeds written accounts. An analogy can be made between this quality and the unconscious as an experience that is supplemental, or antecedent, to what we can say we know. "The unconscious is the only defense against a language frozen into pure, fixed or institutionalized meaning," Jacqueline Rose writes.¹³ Even if, Rose continues, the visual image, in traditional Western painting, has "restricted the human body to the eye," it is a restriction that "could only operate like a law which always produces the terms of its own violation. It is often forgotten that psychoanalysis describes the psychic law to which we are subject, but only in terms of its *failling*."¹⁴

It is not that I think psychoanalysis has any particular priority as an interpretive system for art. Rather, what compels my interest in criticism, ultimately, is that it too (to quote Bruce Nauman) is bound to fail—that it is impossible to account comprehensively for art that's any good. As Guy Davenport said, with disarming simplicity, "All art is symbolic to one degree or another, and the interest in a work of art is inexhaustible."¹⁵ □

1. "Round Table: The Present Conditions of Art Criticism," *October* 100, spring 2002. Participants were George Baker, Benjamin Buchloh, Hal Foster, Andrea Fraser, David Joselit, Rosalind Krauss, James Meyer, John Miller, Helen Molesworth and Robert Storr.
2. James Elkins, *What Happened to Art Criticism?*, Chicago, Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003.
3. Amy Newman, *Challenging Art: Artforum 1962-1974*, New York, Soho Press, 2000.

Critics must recognize art's resistance to verbal summary. What matters most about visual art in the end is that it's visual, that it always involves an essential quality which exceeds written accounts.

4. Irving Sandler, *A Sweeper-Up After Artists*, London and New York, Thames and Hudson, 2003.
5. Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 12.
6. Guy Davenport, *Every Force Evolves a Form*, San Francisco, North Point Press, 1987, p. 107.
7. Anne Carson, *Economy of the Unlost (Reading Simonides of Keos with Paul Celan)*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 1999, p. 55.
8. Elkins, p. 42.
9. *October* 100, p. 202.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 214.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 205.
12. Newman, p. 137.
13. Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, London and New York, Verso, 1986, p. 3.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 232.
15. Davenport, p. 106.

This essay will appear in a forthcoming anthology, Critical Mess: Art Critics on the State of Their Practice, edited by Raphael Rubinstein and published by Hard Press Editions.