

## What Happened to Art Criticism?

James Elkins

*This is excerpted from a pamphlet published in 2004; the entire pamphlet is available on amazon.<sup>1</sup> It was divided into four parts. The first part proposed that no one reads art criticism (a notion that has since been both criticized as unfactual and taken as a virtue), and that art criticism is in crisis if only because it has largely given up judging artworks in favor of describing them. The second part, which was the bulk of the pamphlet, distinguished seven kinds of criticism, from philosophic essays (such as the Introduction to this book) to journalistic criticism (represented here by Ariella Budick, among others). I am not reprinting that section here, except its opening pages, because the two roundtables were themselves an attempt to embody something of the diversity of art criticism. The pamphlet continued with a list of attempts to “cure” the malaise of criticism, which is reprinted here, and an envoi with several proposals, which are omitted.*

### Art Criticism: Writing Without Readers

Art criticism is in worldwide crisis. Its voice has become very weak, and it is dissolving into the background clutter of ephemeral cultural criticism. But its decay is not the ordinary last faint push of a practice that has run its course, because at the very same time, art criticism is also

healthier than ever. Its business is booming: it attracts an enormous number of writers, and often benefits from high-quality color printing and worldwide distribution. In that sense art criticism is flourishing, but invisibly, out of sight of contemporary intellectual debates. So it's dying, but it's everywhere. It's ignored, and yet it has the market behind it.

There is no way to measure the sheer quantity of contemporary writing on visual art. Art galleries almost always try to produce at least a card for each exhibition, and if they can print a four-page brochure (typically made from one sheet of heavy card stock, folded down the middle) it will normally include a brief essay on the artist. Anything more expensive will certainly include an essay, sometimes several. Galleries also keep spiral-bound files on hand with clippings and photocopies from local newspapers and glossy art magazines, and gallery owners will gladly copy those pages for anyone who asks. An afternoon walk in the gallery district of a city in Europe, North or South America, or southeast Asia can quickly yield a bulky armful of exhibition brochures, each one beautifully printed, and each opening with at least a hundred-word essay. There is also a large and increasing number of glossy art magazines, despite the fact that the market is very risky from an entrepreneur's point of view. Large magazine displays in booksellers such as Eason's and Borders carry dozens of art magazines, and glossy art magazines can also be found in newsstands near museums and in college bookstores. No one knows how many glossy art magazines there are because most are considered ephemeral by libraries and art databases, and therefore not collected or indexed. There are so many that no one I know even attempts to keep track. As a rule, academic art historians do not read any of them. At a rough guess, I would say there are perhaps two hundred nationally and internationally distributed art magazines in Europe and the United States, and on the order of five hundred or a thousand

smaller magazines, fliers, and journals. No one knows how many exhibition brochures are produced each year, mainly because no one knows how many galleries there are in the world. Large cities such as New York, Paris, and Berlin have annual gallery guides, but they are not complete and there is no definitive listing. As far as I know no library in the world collects what galleries produce, with exceptions at the high end of the market. Daily newspapers are collected by local and national libraries, but newspaper art criticism is not a subject term in any database I know, so art criticism published in newspapers quickly becomes difficult to access.

In a sense, then, art criticism is very healthy indeed. So healthy that it is outstripping its readers—there is more of it around than anyone can read. Even in mid-size cities, art historians can't read everything that appears in newspapers or is printed by museums or galleries. Yet at the same time art criticism is very nearly dead, if health is measured by the number of people who take it seriously, or by its interaction with neighboring kinds of writing such as art history, art education, or aesthetics. Art criticism is massively produced, and massively ignored.

Scholars in my own field of art history tend to notice only the kinds of criticism that are heavily historically informed and come out of academic settings: principally writing on contemporary art that is published in art historical journals and by university presses. Art historians who specialize in modern and contemporary art also read *Artforum*, *ArtNews*, *Art in America*, and some other journals—the number and names are variable—but they tend not to cite essays from those sources. (A few historians write for those journals, but even then it's rare to find them citing art magazines.) Among the peripheral journals is Donald Kuspit's *Art Criticism*, which has only a small circulation even though it should in principle be of interest to any art critic. The others are a blur—*Art Papers*, *Parkett*, *Modern Painters*, *Tema Celeste*, *Frieze*, *Art*

*Monthly*, *Art Issues*, *Flash Art*, *Documents sur l'art*—and the list melts away into the glossy magazines that are just not read much inside the academy—*Revue de l'art*, *Univers des arts*, *Glass*, *American Artist*, *Southwest Art*... Art historians generally do not get very far along that list. The same can be said of art historians' awareness of newspaper art criticism: it's there as a guide, but never as a source to be cited unless the historian's subject is the history of an artist's reception in the popular press. If an anthropologist from Mars were to study the contemporary art scene by reading books instead of frequenting galleries, it might well seem that catalog essays and newspaper art criticism do not even exist.

Do art criticism and catalog essays function, then, primarily to get people into galleries and to induce them to buy? Probably, but in the case of catalog essays the economic effect does not seem to depend on the writing actually being read—often it is enough to have a well-produced brochure or catalogue on hand to convince a customer to buy. It is not entirely clear that criticism affects the art market except in prominent cases, when the buzz surrounding an artist's show can certainly drive up attendance and prices. In my experience, even art critics who work at prominent newspapers receive only a modicum of letters except in unusual cases. The same phenomenon occurs on the internet, in regard to e-zines and groups: weeks and months can pass with no sign that the texts are being read, and those deserts are punctuated by flurries of emails on controversial issues.

So in brief, this is the situation of art criticism: it is practiced more widely than ever before, and almost completely ignored. Its readership is unknown, unmeasured, and disturbingly ephemeral. If I pick up a brochure in a gallery, I may glance at the essay long enough to see some keyword—perhaps the work is said to be “important,” “serious,” or “Lacanian”—and that

may be the end of my interest. If I have a few minutes before my train, I may pause at the newsstand and leaf through a glossy art magazine. If I am facing a long plane flight, I may buy a couple of magazines, intending to read them and leave them on the plane. When I am visiting an unfamiliar city, I read the art criticism in the local newspaper. But it is unlikely (unless I am doing research for a book like this one) that I will study any of those texts with care or interest: I won't mark the passages I agree with or dispute, and I will not save them for further reference. There just isn't enough meat in them to make a meal: some are fluffy, others conventional, or clotted with polysyllabic praise, or confused, or just very, very familiar. Art criticism is diaphanous: it's like a veil, floating in the breeze of cultural conversations and never quite settling anywhere.

The combination of vigorous health and terminal illness, of ubiquity and invisibility, is growing increasingly strident with each generation. The number of galleries at the end of the twentieth century was many times what it was at the beginning, and the same can be said of the production of glossy art magazines and exhibition catalogues. Newspaper art criticism is harder to measure, although it seems likely there is actually less of it, relative to the population size, than there was a hundred years ago. According to Neil McWilliam, in 1824 Paris had twenty daily newspapers that ran columns by art critics, and another twenty revues and pamphlets that also covered the Salon. None of those writers were employed *as* art critics, but some were virtually full-time just as they are now. Today, even counting the internet, there is nowhere near the same number of practicing critics. So it is possible that newspaper art criticism has gone into a steep decline, and that would be in line with the absence of art criticism from contemporary cultural programming on television and in radio. Some of the early nineteenth-century art critics

were taken seriously by contemporaneous philosophers and writers, and others—the founders of western art criticism—were themselves important poets and philosophers. The eighteenth-century philosopher Denis Diderot is effectively the foundation of art criticism, and he was also a polymath and one of the century’s most important philosophers. By comparison Clement Greenberg, arguably modernism’s most prominent art critic, bungled his philosophy because he was uninterested in getting Kant any more right than he needed to make his points. A good case can be made that Charles Baudelaire enabled mid-nineteenth century French art criticism in a way that no other writer did, and he was of course also an indispensable poet for much of that century and the twentieth. Greenberg wrote extremely well, with a ferocious clarity, but in the hackneyed phrase he was no Baudelaire. These comparisons are perhaps not as unjust as they may seem, because they are symptomatic of the slow slipping of art criticism off the face of the cultural world. Who, after all, *are* the important contemporary art critics? It is not difficult to name critics who have prominent venues: Roberta Smith and Michael Kimmelman at the *New York Times*; Peter Schjeldahl at the *New Yorker*. But among those who aren’t fortunate enough to work for publications with million-plus circulation, who counts as a truly important voice in current criticism? My own list of most-interesting authors includes Joseph Masheck, Thomas McEvilley, Richard Shiff, Kermit Champa, Rosalind Krauss, and Douglas Crimp, but I doubt they are a canon in anyone else’s eyes, and the cloud of names behind them threatens to become infinite: Dave Hickey, Eric Troncy, Peter Plagens, Susan Suleiman, Francesco Bonami, Kim Levin, Helen Molesworth, Donald Kuspit, Buzz Spector, Mira Schor, Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Miwon Kwon, Germano Celant, Giorgio Verzotti—there are hundreds more. The International

Association of Critics of Art (called AICA after the French version of their name) has over four thousand members and branches, so they claim, in seventy countries.

Early twenty-first century art critics may or may not be university trained: in a way it does not matter, because virtually none are trained *as* art critics. Departments of art history almost never offer courses in art criticism, except as an historical subject in courses such as “The History of Art Criticism from Baudelaire to Symbolism.” Art criticism is not considered as part of the brief of art history: it is not an historical discipline, but something akin to creative writing. Contemporary art critics come from many different backgrounds, but they share this one crucial absence: they were not trained as art critics in the way that people are trained as art historians, philosophers, curators, film historians, or literary theorists. There is a limit, I think, to how little this might matter. Just because a field has no academic platform does not mean that it is less rigorous, or less attached to the values and interests of adjacent fields that do have the imprimatur of formal training. But the lack of an academic practice of art criticism—with a few interesting exceptions, such as the program at Stony Brook—means that art criticism is unmoored. Its freedom is exhilarating, occasionally, but for a steady reader it is stultifying. Among the various reasons for art criticism’s vertiginous freedom, its swoops and feints in and out of a dozen disciplines, is its lack of a disciplinary home. I do not mean that criticism would be better off if it were constrained by a conservative or fixed pedagogy: but if it were disciplinary in *any* sense, it would have a center of some kind against which to push. At the moment art critics feel very little resistance. A critic who writes exhibition brochures and catalogues will be constrained a little by the expectation that the piece will not be unfavorable, and a critic who writes for a large-circulation newspaper will be constrained because the public

is unused to new art, or accustomed to moderate opinions. But those and other sources of constraint are minor in comparison with the lack of restraint that is granted to art critics by the absence of an academic home. An academic discipline, as fractious and contradictory as it may be, puts two kinds of pressure on a practitioner: it compels an awareness of colleagues, and it instills a sense of the history of previous efforts. Both are absent, with spectacular and fantastical effect, from current art criticism.

This is the picture of art criticism as I would paint it: it is produced by thousands of people worldwide, but it has no common ground. Art criticism involves a fair amount of money by academic standards, because even modest exhibition brochures are printed in large numbers, on coated stock, with high-quality plates that are rare in academic publishing. Even so, art critics very rarely earn their living from writing criticism. More than half of those with jobs at the top American newspapers earn less than \$25,000 per year, but successful freelance critics may write twenty or thirty essays per year, at a base fee of \$1,000 per essay or \$1 to \$2 per word, or \$35 to \$50 for a brief newspaper review. (My own experience is probably about average; I have charged between \$500 and \$4,000 for essays between one and twenty pages long.) Critics who are actively writing will also be asked to lecture at art schools and travel to exhibitions, with all expenses paid and fees between \$1000 and \$4000. Articles in glossy art magazines pay between \$300 and \$3,000, and those essays can be used both to augment the critic's income and generate further invitations. By comparison an academic art historian or philosopher may easily spend a long and productive career without ever being paid for any publication. Criticism is ubiquitous, then, and sometimes even profitable: but it pays for its apparent popularity by having ghosts for readers. Critics seldom know who reads their work beyond the gallerists who commission it and

the artists about whom they write: and often that reading public is ghostly precisely because it does not exist. A ghostly profession, catering for ghosts, but in a grand style.

As recently as the first half of the twentieth century, art criticism was very different. Art critics were more likely to be concerned with the history of art, including the history of their own practice. It was more common then for critics to think on large scales, comparing their judgments on different occasions, or considering the differences between their positions and those of other critics. Bloomsbury critics like Roger Fry and Clive Bell felt they could stand back and assess large regions of history. Bell's manifesto *Art* demotes everything between the twelfth century and Cézanne: he calls the Renaissance "that strange, new disease," and says that Rembrandt was a genius, but also "a typical ruin of his age." Judgment itself was presented more ambitiously in Bell's generation, as a matter of broader comparisons. Contemporary critics tend not to think outside the box of the exhibition or particular work at hand, or rather they write as if they weren't thinking outside the box. At glossy art magazines, that's sometimes the implicit charge: do not pontificate or wander: stick to the theme.

Early and mid-twentieth century American art critics were also fiercely opinionated and even polemical. At the turn of the century Royal Cortissoz, the stubbornly conservative critic for the *New York Tribune*, fought everything modern except Matisse, and a generation later John Canaday, the backward-looking critic for the *New York Times*, battled Abstract Expressionism with a sarcastic violence that seems outlandish today. Cortissoz, known as a "square shooter," found most European art of the first two decades of the century "crude, crotchety, tasteless," and "arrogant." In a column written in 1960, Canaday critiqued a "dried and caked puddle of blue poster paint" that he found on a wall, pretending it was painting called *Blue Element* by a painter

named Ninguno Denada. He wrote a full-length review of the spill, declaring it “deeply impressive, a profound interpretation of our century of crisis,” comparing Denada to the real-life painters Modest Cuixart, Antoni Tàpies, and Joan Miró, and then refusing to distinguish between his “satire” and the “brainwashing that goes on in universities and museums.” It is hard to imagine a *New York Times* critic these days being that sarcastic. (And the comparison to Cuixart, Tàpies, and Miró are entirely unfair. Even Cuixart’s most uncontrolled paintings have carefully drawn elements superimposed. The real target, of course, was Pollock.)

It is not necessarily the case that critics have become less opinionated: there are many reasons for the changes I am describing, and I will be more specific later on. But I do mean that critics have become less ambitious—if by ambition is meant the desire to try to see the landscape of some art practice and not just the one thing in apparent isolation. There are few living art critics who have gone on the record with what they think of the twentieth century’s major movements. Local judgments are preferred to wider ones, and recently judgments themselves have even come to seem inappropriate. In their place critics proffer informal opinions or transitory thoughts, and they shy from strong commitments. In the last three or four decades, critics have begun to avoid judgments altogether, preferring to describe or evoke the art rather than say what they think of it. In 2002, a survey conducted by the Columbia University National Arts Journalism Program found that judging art is the least popular goal among American art critics, and simply describing art is the most popular: it is an amazing reversal, as astonishing as if physicists had declared they would no longer try to understand the universe, but just appreciate it.

These differences, which I am going to try to flesh out, are enormous. During the same decades that art criticism proliferated around the world, it also receded from the firing lines of cultural critique into the safer and more protected domains of localized description and careful evocation. I do not at all mean that criticism's intellectual purview has shrunk to fit the pluralism, jargon, and epistemological evasiveness that are so often associated with the academic left. I wouldn't argue that we need to regain the hairy-chested health of the impetuous critics of high modernism. It is true that the contemporary critics who are most ambitious in the sense I am using that word are also arch-conservatives, but I do not consider conservatism a promising or even relevant ideological direction for criticism. Writers like Hilton Kramer are deeply detached from what is most interesting in the art world, and it is in part their ambition that prevents them from being able to engage current questions in a promising manner. Yet I want to continue using the word ambition because it strikes me as a fascinating mystery that art criticism has turned so abruptly from the engaged, passionate, historically informed practice it was before the later twentieth century, into the huge, massively funded but invisible and voiceless practice it has effectively become.

I have just two questions in mind. First: does it make sense to talk about art criticism as a single practice, or is it a number of different activities with different goals? Second: does it make sense to try to reform criticism? [*Here, I reprint the opening to the first, and the whole of the second.*]

How Unified is Art Criticism?

If I were to draw a picture of current art criticism I'd make it a hydra, fitted with the traditional seven heads. The first head stands for the *catalog essay*, the kind commissioned for commercial galleries. (It has been said that catalog essays are not art criticism, because they are expected to be laudatory. But that begs the question: if they aren't art criticism, what are they?) The second head is the *academic treatise*, which exhibits a range of obscure philosophic and cultural references, from Bakhtin to Buber and Benjamin to Bourdieu. It is the common target of conservative attacks. Third is *cultural criticism*, in which fine art and popular images have blended, making art criticism just one flavor in a rich stew. Fourth is the *conservative harangue*, in which the author declaims about how art ought to be. Fifth is the *philosopher's essay*, where the author demonstrates the art's allegiance to or deviation from selected philosophic concepts. Sixth is *descriptive art criticism*, the most popular according to the Columbia University survey: its aim is to be enthusiastic but not judgmental, and to bring readers along, in imagination, to artworks that they may not visit. And seventh is *poetic art criticism*, in which the writing itself is what counts. This is the third-most popular goal of art criticism according to the Columbia University survey, but I suspect it is also one of the most widely-shared goals across the board.

I don't mean that these are the hydra's only heads, or that the heads couldn't be renumbered for other purposes. The critic Peter Plagens has suggested a schema with three parts, and for many writers the only important division is between academia and everything outside of it. The seven heads swerve and blur together, and sometimes it seems there are many more, or else just one conglomerate Babel. Yet often enough the combined practice of art criticism can be imagined as seven—or so—separate practices. At least it seems useful to me to picture it that way.

[...]

### Seven Unworkable Cures

It is tempting to try to escape the fog of current art criticism and run out into the clear air of certainty. Of course, everyone has their own idea about where that clear air might be found. The people on the *October* roundtable on art criticism—one of the texts that is central to the roundtables in this book—wanted more attention to rigor, theoretical sophistication, and “levels of complexity in discourse.” Others would prefer it if art critics had rules, norms, theories, or at least some concerns in common. There have been laments that the twenty-first century has no guiding voice—even one that might guide us through the decaying labyrinth of pluralism. Newspaper calls for the reform of art criticism usually attack jargon, and promote simple ideas. Conservative commentators want to boost art’s moral purpose. Kramer wants to bring in a bit of old-fashioned discipline, “discrimination,” and firm standards. Newspaper critics themselves sometimes want to reform criticism by removing its connection to the market.

I think things are more difficult. The very idea of finding something wrong with the current state of criticism is itself historically determined. Why should *October* have a roundtable discussion on criticism, a kind of writing it has largely refrained from publishing, in the fall of 2001? Why does a text with the title “What Happened to Art Criticism?” appear in spring 2003? It is important to understand why a problem comes to the surface at a given point in time, because we all ride currents of historical thinking of which we’re only intermittently aware. Thinking about the reasons for various calls for the reform of criticism helps reveal that the proposed solutions tend to be born from nostalgia for specific moments in the past. Let me try to

demonstrate that with seven examples of increasing length and difficulty. (These do not correspond to the seven hydra heads: but once you start thinking in sevens it is hard to stop.)

1. *Criticism should be reformed by returning it to a golden age of apolitical formalist rigor.* In *A Roger Fry Reader*, the art historian Christopher Reed proposes Fry can be interpreted as a “postmodern” critic on account of his complexity, his “iconoclastic relation to authority,” and his “social mission.” Hilton Kramer wrote his usual impatient review, claiming Reed’s perspective is unworkable and false: a typical product, Kramer thinks, of postmodern “historical nullification.” In place of Reed’s version, Kramer wants a thoughtful but conservative Fry, one who was never an “avant-garde incendiary.” Kramer’s dislike of politically-inflected art criticism prompts him to stress Fry’s interest in finding laws of art in “a realm apart from life”—a phrase Reed uses to remind readers that is not *all* that Fry did. There’s nothing to stop Fry from being reborn for each new generation: that is the nature of historical reception. Yet Kramer’s Fry is Kramer *avant la lettre*: a brilliant formalist, who knows and respects the older history of art, and is unafraid of proposing “a realm apart from life.” Clearly, Kramer’s polemic is driven by nostalgia. He wants things the way he imagines they once were, and that is not a plausible model for contemporary criticism.

2. *Criticism lacks a strong voice.* In 1973 the artist and art historian Quentin Bell lamented the decline of authoritative art critics using the same observation with which I began: “while the literature of art is, in publishers’ terms, booming, it has in one respect suffered a loss.” What Bell misses is a critic who can be a “censor” and “apologist for the contemporary scene, a Diderot, a Baudelaire, a Ruskin or a Roger Fry.” Why is there no such “grand pundit” on the art scene? Perhaps, Bell thinks, it is the “character of modern art,” which is difficult to discuss, or

maybe it's the spread of high-quality illustrations, which obviate the need for description. Unfortunately for Bell's argument the history of criticism shows that many, perhaps most, decades since Vasari have lacked a strong critical voice. Criticism was weak and dispersed before Winckelmann, as Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann has shown. It was weak after Diderot, as Michael Fried has argued. After Baudelaire there were many interesting critics, among them Theophile Thoré, Ernest Chesneau, Jules Castagnary, Edmond Duranty, Félix Fénéon or Albert Aurier, but none have been as important for modernism as Baudelaire. Criticism was arguably weak again before Bloomsbury, and again before Greenberg. It doesn't reflect poorly on us that we have no prophet at the moment. Bell's complaint is another instance of a nostalgia for something past: in this case, mainly a Bloomsbury past.

3. *Criticism needs systematic concepts and rules.* To some observers criticism just seems like a mess. In the 1940s the aesthetician Helmut Hungerford wanted to arrange paintings in "classes," and to work out standards such as organization, integration, and skill, that are relevant for each class. Behind his dogged rationalism I read an anxiety about the fate of formal analysis. Hungerford's criteria crumbled around him, even while he tried to shore them up by proposing additional criteria of "coherence" within classes and standards. These days, as far as I can see, he is entirely forgotten. Perhaps art criticism cannot be reformed in a logical sense because it was never well-formed in the first place. Art criticism has long been a mongrel among academic pursuits, borrowing whatever it needed from other fields (the sublime and the beautiful, of judgment and imitation, of the gaze and the spectacle). It has never been a matter of the consistent application of philosophic concepts, and there is little sense in hoping that it ever will be.

4. *Criticism must become more theoretical.* Perhaps, then—lowering the bar a bit here—art criticism might make use of shared theoretical interests, no matter where they’re cribbed from. The film critic Annette Michelson argues that in a brilliant essay on Pauline Kael. She compares Kael to Umberto Eco (who wrote an essay on *Casablanca*): the “very obvious difference,” Michelson says, is that Eco is convinced that “the infusion and support of an evolving body of theoretical effort will work to the advantage of communication.” Michelson thinks that Kael’s “intransigent resistance to the theorization of the subject of her life’s work inhibited her ability to account for film’s impact in terms other than taste and distaste.” As the years went on, Kael “ceased to renew her intellectual capital, to acknowledge and profit by the achievements of a huge collective effort.” This is an admirable way of putting the point: it is crucial to be part of the same reservoir of concepts and theoretical tools as the rest of the generation, even if they only enter into the work in the form of unused capital. I would find it difficult to argue against this: it is not dogmatic, and it isn’t propped up by nostalgia for some earlier state of perfect passion and eloquence. I’ll have more to say about it at the end.

5. *Criticism needs to be serious, complex, and rigorous.* This call is more or less the consensus recommendation in the 2001 *October* roundtable, and it has a particular lineage: it can be traced to the critics associated with *Artforum* from its founding in 1962 to around 1967. Critics including Carter Ratcliff, Rosalind Krauss, John Coplans, Max Kozloff, Barbara Rose, Peter Plagens, Walter Darby Bannard, Phil Leider, Annette Michelson, and others were part of a loose and ultimately divisive group that nevertheless shared a sense of criticism’s newly serious purpose. Amy Newman’s book of interviews, *Challenging Art: Artforum 1962-1974* is a good source for the group’s elusive sense of community. In *Challenging Art*, John Coplans suggests

that the wave of commitment to analytic criticism came indirectly from expatriate German scholars, preeminently Erwin Panofsky, despite the fact that several of the art critics began their careers by repudiating work by art historians such as Sydney Freedberg. Coplans points out that the only prior American model for serious criticism was *The Magazine of Art*, especially when Robert Goldwater became editor in 1947. The *Magazine of Art*, he says, was “absolutely against the French method,” which was perceived as a tradition of poets. Several of the critics and historians Newman interviews make analogous claims: the poet and critic Carter Ratcliff recalls how some poet-critics remained interested in “a private history, a personal history,” while others, the *Artforum* group especially, “tried to establish some *defensible* scheme, a schematic of history,” into which they placed new art. “And in that way,” he concludes, “they could keep track of history *right as it happened*.” In the same book, Rosalind Krauss distinguishes between the *Artforum* kind of criticism and a preeminently French “*belle lettristic*” kind of writing, where “poets would compose emotive catalogue prefaces for artists.” The criticism published in *Artforum* was indebted, she says, to Anglo-American New Criticism, which “involved a textual analysis in which the project was to make statements about the text in front of you that had to be verifiable. You couldn’t introduce things about the artist’s biography or about history. It was really limited to what was on the page so that any reader who was at all competent could *check* what you were saying about the work.” Aside from Greenberg, Krauss says, she had been “very frustrated by the vagueness and unverifiability of *opinion*” in English-language art critics such as Sidney Janis, Thomas Hess, Dore Ashton, and Harold Rosenberg. Nothing they wrote struck her as “*hard*, verifiable.” Fried, similarly, mentions “all that fustian writing—Hess and the others.” (*Fustian*, a very sharp-edged word for a woolly fabric, meaning not only bombastic and inflated,

but also, as a consequence, worthless.) Coplans says the only criticism that seemed interesting in London in the early 1960s was “Lawrence Alloway fighting it out with Sir Herbert Read” over the importance of surrealism. Robert Rosenblum sums up the situation at *Artforum* by recalling an article by Max Kozloff called “Venetian Art and Florentine Criticism” (December 1967). “I loved the title,” Rosenblum recalls, because “it put its finger on one of the problems of *Artforum* classic writing, namely it was Florentine, it was intellectual and bone-dry, and never really could correspond to the sensuous pleasures of looking at art.” Rosenblum’s special viewpoint aside (his writing is famously full-blooded, in these terms), the metaphor of Florence and Venice is accurate: *Artforum*, and later *October*, stood for rigor as against fustian writing of all sorts.

All that is the foundation of what “serious criticism” continues to mean. Since 1976, it has also been exemplified by *October*, and by essays written by Thomas Crow, Thomas McEvelley, and a score of others in different venues. Calls for a return to criticism that is serious, complex, and rigorous are indebted to the model provided by *Artforum* and its descendents. That means, in turn, that it is important to ask whether it makes sense to revive those particular senses of commitment, verifiability, and intellectualism. It seems to me the only defensible answer is that such values are no longer a good fit for art at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Metaphors of intellectual *labor*, of difficulty, of challenge recur in *Artforum* discussions, beginning with Greenberg: when it is good the work is dry, hard, obdurate and irrefragible... it is not easy to imagine how those values can be transposed to the present, and even if they were, it is not easy to picture how useful they would be.

6. *Criticism should become a reflection on judgments, not the parading of judgments.*

This is essentially what Rosalind Krauss argued in 1971 and again in 1985, and it is put into

practice in reception histories and institutional critiques, mainly in academic writing. If you conceive of the art world as a matrix of institutional and power relations, then there is no immediate sense to words like “quality” or “value”: they are determined by divisions of labor within the art world, and produced for different purposes including academic power and market value. If you are interested in reception history, then the hard-fought battles in the art world become objects of historical interest. You will want to know the historical contexts that produced interest in words like “quality” or “value,” and your interest will be purely historical or even philological—you won’t have any more investment in the outcome than an entomologist has watching one tribe of ants battle against another. Even the explanation offered by institutional critique will become susceptible to reception history: the idea of institutional critique began in the 1980s, and has its own historical trajectory. Within that course, its explanations for words like “quality” or “value” will have weight, but before, after, or outside it they will not.

The problem that faces both institutional critique and reception history is the present. We live in it, we make judgments in it. When we judge contemporary art, we engage concepts that we believe in—there is no other way to judge. For a person who practices reception history, that poses a truly difficult problem. Such a writer will be acutely aware that no concepts are born in the present. Concepts that are used to judge art must have their own histories, and once those histories become apparent, it will not be possible to believe in the concepts with the wholehearted commitment that they once commanded. If a figure like Greenberg has already receded far enough into the past to that his discourse is an object of historical analysis, that means concepts at play in contemporary art are entirely unrelated to his. If they aren’t—if Greenberg’s senses of words like “flatness,” “abstraction,” “kitsch,” and “avant-garde” are still echoing in the

present—then the evaluation of contemporary art becomes extremely problematic. How, after all, is it possible to judge a work using criteria that are no longer believable, that belong to another time? When concepts all belong to past writers, criticism becomes chronicle, and judgment becomes meditation on past judgment. The present is immersed in history, and finally drowns in it.

These are difficult points, and I have put them as clearly as I can. As far as I can see, critics such as Buhloh who practice institutional critique and reception history do not take the confluence of everyday judgment and considered neutrality about judgment to be problematic: like everyone, Buhloh judges new work as he encounters it, and he understands older works as the products of the conversations of their time. As a prescription for art criticism, the turn to reflection on judgment is still ill-resolved, especially when its aim is to replace art criticism.

7. *At least a critic should occasionally take a stand or have a position.* This seems sensible, an even inevitable: it is a minimal demand. It is, however, exactly what is most in contention in contemporary criticism. Let me pose it as a contrast between two writers I take to be pretty much diametrically opposed. The first is Jerry Saltz, currently art critic at the *Village Voice*; the second Michael Fried, once the leading figure in *Artforum*. I know both of them, and I can hardly think of two more opposite people. Michael Fried, as everyone who has met him can testify, is absolutely and unswervingly faithful to certain theoretical commitments he developed in the 1960s: the project of modernism as he has delineated it; the indispensability of a fully informed sense of art history; the central critical and historical importance of art that compels, for a given time and audience, conviction. Jerry Saltz is a kind of inversion of those values: it's not that he isn't argumentative—he is as sharp and funny and talkative as they come—but in my

experience at least his arguments are ad hoc, and he wants them that way. This is just as relevant to Saltz's art criticism as Fried's ferocious commitment is to his, because Saltz's writing is effervescent and colloquial, as if he were continuously surprised by himself. Saltz has a collection of forty thousand slides—the collection is so large that MoMA has asked for it when he retires—and when he lectures, he shows pictures of all sorts of things: his taxi ride in from the airport, the look of the streets in the city he's in, and the outside of the galleries he visits. It is not just a distraction, it's a warm-up for the swerving observations that will follow.

When I asked Saltz what essay of his best addresses the conundrum of the contemporary critic's position, he sent me to a piece called "Learning on the Job," which he wrote in the fall of 2002. In it he reports being buttonholed by Barbara Kruger, who reacted to his apparent lack of critical method by saying, "We really need to talk, buddy boy!" Part of the essay is Saltz's position statement, or rather lack-of-position statement. He is against theory, by which he means Procrustean formulas that shape experience before the fact. "My only position," he writes,

is to let the reader in on my feelings; try to write in straightforward, jargon-free language; not oversimplify or dumb down my responses; aim to have an idea, a judgment, or a description in every sentence; not take too much for granted; explain how artists might be original or derivative and how they use techniques and materials; observe whether they're developing or standing still; provide context; and make judgments that hopefully amount to something more than just my opinion. To do this requires more than a position or a theory. It requires something else. This something else is what art, and criticism, are all about.

There are nine parts to that long sentence, separated by semicolons. The first, second, and third are matters of tone and audience, and are not directly relevant at the moment. The fourth—to “aim to have an idea, a judgment, or a description in every sentence”—is a position against illogic, although it is also not a position in favor of a continuously developed logical argument. (I think it is actually impossible to write a grammatical sentence that doesn’t express an idea, a judgment, or a description.) The fifth part, that he does not want to “take too much for granted,” says again that he does not want to have a “theory” that guides experience. The sixth, seventh, and eighth clauses (beginning “explain how artists might be original or derivative” and including explaining to artists “how they might be original or derivative” and providing “context”) are one hundred percent art history, not art criticism, and they contain a hint of a theory because they imply that innovation is better than repetition—that the avant-garde, or some multiplied pluralist form of it, remains an indispensable guide to criticism.

The ninth and final clause, promising to “make judgments that hopefully amount to something more than just my opinion,” is to my mind the lynchpin of the paradox of positionless, or theoryless, art criticism. It is also the only clause of the nine that is about critical judgments, as opposed to art historical information, style, logic, or audience. It is likely, given human nature, that the judgments Saltz makes in *The Village Voice* will be shared by other people. Logically speaking, if everything he said were shared by only a few of his readers, his criticism would be extremely unpopular, and if everything he said were shared by none of his readers, it would be perceived as nonsense. But the clause “make judgments that hopefully amount to something more than just my opinion” means more than that, because what is at stake is not popularity or sense, it is historical connection. Saltz’s judgments amount to more than just his own opinion,

and they do so by sharing common ground with judgments that can be assigned to streams of modernist and postmodernist thinking. This is where the paradox enters, because in my reading Saltz is saying both “I do not want to be fettered by theory,” and “My criticism needs to connect to previous theories.” He needs to connect, but not know too much about that connection: not to worry it, not to get too serious or systematic about it. To keep the edge, stay nimble, and be able to make acute judgments, it is necessary not to think about other people’s theories, but when the job is done—in the ninth clause—it is also important that the common ground is evident for those who choose to look.

It is not common practice to read newspaper criticism quite as slowly as I have here, or to read quite as much into it as I have. I don’t doubt I have gotten this wrong from Saltz’s viewpoint, but I also know this is what the sentence says. And just to be clear: Saltz’s positionless position has granted him any number of wonderful insights. Consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, he might say, and for the purposes of his writing and his encounters with objects consistency certainly has limited appeal—in fact it tends to appear as “theory.” I do not object to any of that: spontaneity may be a fiction, and pure openness to an object may be impossible, but that is wholly irrelevant when it comes to the effects those putative states actually have on Saltz’s writing. The difficulty begins when the sum total of his criticism is weighed against other people’s criticism—not that Saltz has ever said he thought such a project would be worth anything. But from my point of view, historical meaning cannot be kept back: once it begins to leak into a text, as it does in several of the nine clauses, the text will soon be soaked. Once a single judgment is made whose sense depends, no matter how obliquely, on judgments made in the previous history of art, then sooner or later every judgment will want to

take its significance from history. And that means, according to the logic of floods, that no wall can keep historical meaning at bay: in the end it is not only possible but necessary to ask how the sum total of Saltz's writing compares with other critics' writing. This is the crucial point that is so often missing from arguments in favor of pluralism: if individual judgments, the building blocks of the text, are significant on account of their connection to art history, then the entire corpus has to be weighed in an historical balance. Not every day, luckily, and not while you are encountering the art or arguing with Barbara Kruger—but eventually, if *anything* is to make sense.

This same point is made with characteristic concision in Greenberg's "Complaints of an Art Critic," just after he has proclaimed that aesthetic judgments are "given and contained in the immediate experience of art," and wholly "involuntary." Even so, he writes, "qualitative principles or norms are there somewhere, in subliminal operation," because "otherwise aesthetic judgments would be purely subjective, and that they are not is shown by the fact that the verdicts of those who care most about art and pay it the most attention converge over the course of time to form a consensus." Greenberg did not suppose that the uncovering of such a consensus was any of his business, and I do not think it is part of the brief of every piece of art criticism: but it becomes necessary whenever the question pertains to the sense and significance of a critic's *entire* position, or sum of positions. That is where Saltz's ninth clause becomes evasive. To "make judgments that hopefully amount to something more than just my opinion": they will inevitably amount to something more than his opinion, so the question is why only hope? Why not be the one who watches and keeps count?

What is *not* opposed to this in Fried’s art criticism? The strength of his beliefs, and the way they are tempered with reasoned explanations, are especially clear in an exchange that took place at Brandeis University in 1966, during a panel discussion on criticism that also included Barbara Rose, Max Kozloff, and Sidney Tillim. Rose recalled that Greenberg once quoted Matthew Arnold to the effect that the task of the critic was to define the mainstream. But, she said, “at any given moment the mainstream is only part of the total activity, and in our time it may even be the least part. Thus to concentrate on the mainstream is to narrow one’s range to the point where even tributaries to the mainstream, such as Dada, Surrealism, and Pop art, are not worthy of consideration.” Fried replied:

I feel tempted to say, if someone likes *that* stuff—putting aside the question of what, in a given instance, that stuff *is*—I simply can’t believe his claim that he is *also* moved or convinced or flattened by the work of Noland, say, or Olitski or Caro. I mean that. It’s not that I *refuse* to believe it, I really *can’t*. I have no way of understanding what I am asked to believe. The most I can do is assume that whoever makes this claim admires Noland’s or Olitski’s paintings or Caro’s sculptures, not for the wrong *reasons* exactly, but, as it were, in the grip of the wrong experience—an experience of mistaken identity.

This is different but analogous to Greenberg’s claim that he did not always agree with his own judgments, but that he was forced to make them. Fried implies he is in the grip of a position that is both reasoned—as the cogently imagined reconstruction of an opposing position testifies—and also passionate to the point of being irrevocable. Greenberg’s most forceful articulation of his position on his own powerlessness in the face of his own judgment was made in the same essay “Complaints of an Art Critic,” which was a contribution to an *Artforum* series of essays on the

state of criticism. The most compressed statement of his position against the idea that a critic should have a position is this:

You cannot legitimately want or hope for anything from art except quality. And you cannot lay down conditions for quality. However and wherever it turns up, you have to accept it. You have your prejudices, your leanings and inclinations, but you are under the obligation to recognize them as that and keep them from interfering.

Both Fried's and Greenberg's positions on the matter of conviction are outlandishly strong, and I do not know any critic or historian who has taken them as seriously as they want to be taken. Some art historians, including Thierry De Duve, have thought about what they imply, but that is as it were from the outside, as historical observers of other people's theories. No one, I think, has taken them to heart, by which I mean considered the possibility or the desirability of having such convictions, entirely apart from the kinds of art that Greenberg or Fried championed. (As Fried said, "putting aside the question of what, in a given instance, that stuff *is*.") The usual attitude is to conflate Fried's or Greenberg's positions on conviction with the art they defended, making it possible to discard the former on account of the latter. That misunderstanding is what allows people to write off Fried after they have decided they don't like Olitski as much as he does, or to stop reading Greenberg once they've discovered he did not like Pop art. Things are more difficult than that.

Fried's *position* in the early essays is a matter of allegiance to modernist painting and sculpture, but it is not a position that can be *taken* in the sense in which a person says, "He took that position." It is a position that Fried held then and still does hold, but not one he chose out of a selection of other positions. If it were that kind of position, readers would be able to read his

texts in such a way as to disclose the prior position that enabled him to “take up” the modernist, anti-literalist position. It would be possible to follow the antecedent positions, be persuaded by them, and take them up. The Greenberg of “Complaints of a Critic” would say that Fried’s position is not a position that he needs to have *agreed with*: it is simply one he “accepted,” because it compelled conviction and therefore drove the writing forward.

Saltz’s *theory*—his theory about how art critics should not have theories—is more akin to the kind of position that a person can *choose to take*, because Saltz thinks of theory as a thing that springs from some irrelevant prior experience. If you decide your Theory of Everything over coffee before you go to the gallery opening, your review is apt to be atrocious. That kind of theory, or position, ruins the possibility of open-minded encounters with objects. In the course of his essays, Saltz does take up less permanent positions, but they are short-lived, sensitive to the changing art, the time of day, and his mood at the moment. Those kinds of unstable positions are probably better called *stances*. The word is common in contemporary art criticism, because it helps suggest that full-blown positions are too unwieldy in the current pluralist climate. *Stance* also suggests something that Fried and Greenberg would find wholly unacceptable: that the critic is an agent who stands back from the writing, picking and choosing positions to suit different occasions. That is the rhetorical force of the phrase, “My stance on that is...” as opposed to “My stand on that is...” The question that “stance” begs is the source of the authority that invests the critic-as-agent with the ability to pick and choose stances. What stand, what position, could permit and orchestrate the lightning-fast changes of stances that comprise contemporary art criticism? Saltz is like a weather vane, spinning around to match the breeze at any given moment, and Fried is like a thermostat, either on or off, with no intermediate setting. Between

the two there is a curious and unexplored territory. Clearly, if art criticism is to be reformed by requiring critics to take definite positions, they cannot be the kinds of positions Fried exemplifies because those can't be taken: and if criticism is to go on without positions, it cannot go the way Saltz goes without running into the problem of not having positions.

Perhaps it is best not to worry the problem of positions at all, but to reform criticism by making it more honest, immediate, and engaging. Saltz writes energetically on all sorts of things without worrying about how he's doing in the absence of "theories," and Fried's pronouncements on criticism are rare in comparison to the essays that propose judgments about art. Still, positions can never entirely disappear. Robert Hughes is a curious example. He has weighed in on virtually the whole of Western painting after the Renaissance—his writing is significantly more comprehensive than all but just a few art historians—and in all that writing he has almost never pondered his positions. In a brilliant essay on Francesco Clemente, he sighs over the "elusive," "curiously polymorphous" art, which "always looks hasty," and is "usually banal." He quips: when Clemente "is light, he is very, very light." And he complains: most of the time, Clemente "draws like a duffer." Then he settles in to look at just one image, an enigmatic beach scene with five red wheels. Could they be from a child's cart? An allusion to Ezekiel's wheels of fire? Symbols for the rank of angels called Thrones?

By the simplest means, one is shifted sideways into a parallel world of improbabilities. At its best... Clemente's work lives a tremulous, only partly decipherable life at the juncture of eros and cultural memory. It is rarefied, intelligent and decadent, although its intelligence is more literary than plastic and its decadence never fails to make collectors want to cuddle it.

This is wonderful writing: judicious, measured, improvisational. The final “cuddle” is a typical hit: Hughes made much of his reputation by deflating reputations. Reading Hughes, I have often had the feeling that if he were to say what he was looking for, or what he found himself responding to—if, in other words, he would present observations as if they were theories—then I wouldn’t be interested. He has said he values clarity, poise, technical skill, solidity (de Kooning’s early drawings are “all nuance and doubt on top” and “iron below”), senses of space, a redeeming “cultural synthesis” (Pollock), an “unmistakable grandeur of symbolic vision” (Kiefer), concreteness over abstract ideas, and art with its own scale and density” as opposed to mass media. These ideals are insubstantial and tend to evaporate in the face of the works. They are also, as he would acknowledge, mainly late romantic and early modernist concepts. (Most can be found in Cortisoz’s criticism at the turn of the century.) Hughes is broadly popular in America and England, but in my experience he is not regarded with any special interest in academia. Aside from all the usual reasons including academic élitism, the neglect is caused by the lightness of the ideas that serve as his positive criteria. Readers like him, I think, because they like his impatience with sham, and they enjoy the rawness of the reasons he gives. Those attractions may keep their minds off the uninteresting reasons why art succeeds.

It really does matter that Hughes can write great salt-and-pepper prose, and that he comes out with brilliant images, like the one of Greenberg’s disciples “rocking and muttering over the last grain of pigment” in Morris Louis’s canvases, “like students of the Talmud disputing a text, before issuing their communiqués about the Inevitable Course of Art History to the readers of *Artforum*”—or, my own favorite, the notion that Max Beckmann is poised “between the sleep walk and the goose step.” But when the subject comes around to twentieth-century art criticism

as a whole, in its relation to art history and to wider intellectual debates, then it does matter when debunking takes precedence over thinking about the shape of history, and it matters that Hughes's positions, insofar as they can be gleaned between the lines, are not put to the test by comparing them with previous judgments. Hughes doesn't care much about what other people have written, so he focuses on debunking received ideas and on finding the right words for his own responses.

Positionless art critics, including those like Hughes who are just not interested in positions, can still be compelling. Yet there is a difference between a critic such as David Sylvester, who was scrupulous about his own reactions even though he often had no idea how they might fit in with other people's, and a critic like David Banks, who recently praised installation art by the Bristol artists Sonya Hanney and Adam Dade by admitting that "in the grand tradition of art criticism, I don't know a lot about it, but I know what I like." Often what Sylvester has to say springs directly from his own visceral reactions: "art affects one in different parts of one's body," he told the critic Martin Gayford in an interview in 2001. "For example, sometimes in the solar plexus or the pit of one's stomach, sometimes in the shoulder blades... Or one may get a feeling of levitation—an experience I particularly associate with Matisse." Sylvester's narrow focus is justified because phenomenology frames his critical approach; Banks's opinions can't be defended in the same way, and neither can Hughes's.

There is a lot of treacherous ground between the kind of unwanted convictions that possessed Greenberg, and the positionless position—the theory of theorylessness—espoused by Saltz. In between are the intense convictions, both possessed and possessing, that drive Fried's art criticism, and the fugitive criteria that sometimes appear in Hughes's writing, and then vanish

just as quickly. Art critics who do not seem to have positions can end up having them anyway, when the sum total of many judgments seem to point in one direction, the way a swarm of gnats slowly rises or falls even though the individuals are moving in all different directions. A position can materialize out of the most concerted efforts to avoid being consistent. All that is par for the course: it's the way writing works. Positionlessness finds its limit, however, when the writing itself implies there should be a position. A critic who recoils from theories may fall prey to an autoimmune reaction when his own criticism implies that he does in fact have a position. On the other hand, a ferociously strong position or Theory of Everything limits discourse with other critics and historians, and in Greenberg's case it even seems to have limited his articulation of the genesis of his own preferences. Clearly, it is dubious at best to reform art criticism by requiring art critics to have positions: it leads back along an uneven path toward a kind of commitment so ferocious even the person who held it, Greenberg, described it as a force outside himself. It's not that the opposite is best—it's that positions are not things to which a person can return.

This ends my list of seven proposals for reforming criticism. My moral is simple: no reform comes without the very severe penalties of anachronism and historical naiveté.

---

<sup>1</sup> *What Happened to Art Criticism?* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, distributed by the University of Chicago Press, 2003). This particular excerpt is also reprinted in *The State of Art Criticism*, edited by Michael Newman and James Elkins, vol. 4 of *The Art Seminar* (New York: Routledge, 2007).