

ART CRITICISM: WHERE'S THE BEEF?

by Mark Van Proyen

[FROM WHENCE COMES] THE EXTREME TIMIDITY OF TODAY'S CRITICISM? THE GALLERIES ARE SUFFERING SKYROCKETING RENTS WHICH FORCES THEM TO MAKE INCREASINGLY SAFER CHOICES IN THE ART WHICH THEY PRESENT. ARTISTS ARE UNDER EVER-INCREASING PRESSURE TO PROVIDE THAT ART AND THE MAGAZINES ARE UNDER PRESSURE TO PROMOTE IT. WRITERS WANT TO GET PUBLISHED, SO THEY HAVE LITTLE CHOICE BUT TO ALSO FALL INTO LINE.

—Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, "The Implicit and Explicit Purpose of Criticism," 2001
(paper given at College Art Association annual conference, Chicago).

From the time of Charles Baudelaire clear up to the early 1970s, art critics could be counted on to take and defend their polemic positions with a zeal and hubris that suggested the fate of the entire civilization hung on their every word. Of course, the real impact of their words was never quite that dramatic, but they did manage to hold the conventional and institutional wisdoms of their day accountable to something that resembled a high standard, be it Baudelaire's nineteenth-century Romanticism or Clement Greenberg's High Modernist formalism. In both of these cases, it was the failures and hypocrisies of official taste that motivated their scorn, whether it was found in the exhibitions of the French Salon or in the refusal of the Museum of Modern Art to support Abstract Expressionism during the late 1940s. History tells us that the critics' views did

eventually prevail, not only by keeping institutional decision-makers a bit more honest, but in actually articulating and thus forming the kind of adventurous taste that institutions would come to support.

Now, things are clearly different. There are a great many more writers paying attention to the visual arts than ever before, yet a great majority of them shy away from taking a coherent position about assigning real value to their subjects, lest they offend anyone associated with academic or art-exhibiting institutions. I would submit that art is all the poorer because of this situation. Inclusion in the official ranks becomes the only criterion for artistic success regardless of whether or not the work is good, relevant, or useful. This situation ignores the psycho-symbolic eventfulness of the art in question, its ability to engage people in a socio-symbolic

adventure. Nonetheless, a great many critics are talking about something, so I make efforts to follow the conversation.

There were several sessions devoted to art criticism at the recent College Art Association (CAA) conference held in Chicago from February 28 to March 3 of this year, and I attended each and every one. This might testify to my own masochism, but I think that I can be exonerated from that charge on the honorable grounds of professional interest, or at the very least, an understandable desire to check out the competition. Yet, as I now reflect on these sessions and the exchanges they fostered, I find myself wondering how the profession of art criticism as a whole can continue to exonerate itself from a similar charge of masochism. The ostensible topics of these sessions ranged from an examination of the economics of art

publishing to the catch-all question "What Are Critics For?" Yet from all of them one could not help but glean this depressing refrain: don't expect critics to do anything to improve the current circumstances of art and its world, because they are too busy shilling for the very institutions that keep them in a state of underpaid exploitation and servitude.

This recurring theme was certainly evident at the Thursday afternoon session sponsored by the American Section of the International Art Critic's Association (AICA). Chaired by Eleanor Heartney, the session was titled "The Ivory Divide: Living to Write vs. Writing to Live." Here, the unifying topic was an examination of the difference between what it means to write for the market (i.e. for a living) as opposed to writing for academic tenure. One might hope that it would have led to a rousing discussion about the opportunities, liabilities, and responsibilities that respectively inhere in being a public intellectual versus an academic intellectual. In fact, the panel delivered on this promise when art historian Robert Hobbs (a tenured academic from Virginia Commonwealth University) read his excellent paper elaborating the concerns, pitfalls, and problems of both. Hobbs warned critics about how complicated it can be to find a space for one's work that is constrained neither by ghettoization within the academy, nor by journalistic servitude to the whims of the market.

Hobbs's examination of the etiquette of criticism made me think of the plight of two friends who teach at different schools, and who coincidentally are both standing for tenure. One has been told that her writing for contemporary art magazines is essentially journalism, and is thus inappropriate as a form of "legitimate scholarship." The other person writes similar articles for many of the same magazines, and—you guessed it—he has been told that his work is too "narrow" in relation to "the institution's goals of broad community outreach." These isolated situations are telling examples of the way complaints about style are often thinly veiled attempts to suppress certain types of uncomfortable content. As such they can be construed as a form of passive-aggressive censorship that is more insidious (and far more widespread) than

overt forms. The problem is that this form of censorship also seems to be more effective in quieting dissenting voices, as can be proven by an honest answer to this simple question:

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TIME YOU READ
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either by mocking sacred cows or valorizing the unproven and obscure? I can't remember the last time I did, and I read a lot of art criticism.

In the same session, academic administrator and art historian Judith Russi Kirshner seemed to have found her own version of that slippery space between the academic and the journalistic when she advocated that critics "embrace conflict of interest," a term whose boundaries were never clearly drawn in the short session. On one hand, it is easy to sympathize with a view that might make the idea of a community of collective and professional interest an overarching priority, especially when our brave new dog-eat-dog art world no longer resembles anything even remotely communitarian, steeped as it is in a fealty to hierarchies and pecking orders. On the other hand, it seems like embracing conflict of interest is the one thing that serious critics should never do if they want their words to have any real weight, because critics who live in glass houses of convenient self-servitude shouldn't throw stones. (Remember how Greenberg's dalliance in the field of "art consulting" with the dealers French and Co. led to an irreversible undermining of his hard-earned reputation?)

Brass tacks were invoked when Susan Snodgrass asked, "What do you do when you are offered a lot of money to write about an artist whose work you do not respect?" It was at that point that the discussion quickly trailed off into an embarrassing round of excuse-making,

which was abruptly cut short by a question from the audience: "Why don't you adopt the attitude of an artist about your work by writing what you want and need to write, and support that activity with the same kind of day job that artists use to support their work?" Of course, the somewhat evasive answer was that being a critic was an arduous and complicated business requiring lots of time and study (thereby implying that being an artist has no such requirement), but here it suddenly all seemed unconvincing and anxiety-provoking, leading everybody involved to want to end the session as soon as possible.

The boundary of what is and what is not art was aggressively blurred in a Friday afternoon session chaired by Claire Wolfe Krantz, titled "The Anecdote Resurrected: Artist-Writers and The Effects of Random Events in Criticism." This title seemed to ask how artists approach the task of operating as critics, but that was just the tease. In fact, it featured a group of critic-artists showing their videos, rather fatuously claiming them to be a form of criticism. This invoked the hoary stereotype of the artist who takes on the mantle of the critic for the sake of self-promotion and the peddling of influence under false pretenses. Certainly, there are many artist-critics who do praiseworthy work in both arenas, and the interplay and crossover between the two roles can often lead to a kind of anecdotal writing that gives vivid experiential texture to seemingly dry polemic issues. Also, a working knowledge of the way works of art are made can often augment criticism in very productive ways. But critical argumentation was not in evidence at this session, and issues were raised only by discussant John Kissick in his end-of-session wrap-up that returned to the powers and limits of anecdote as a rhetorical trope that can give experiential support to hard-to-grasp ideas.

The best of the CAA sessions devoted to art criticism took place in the Hilton Hotel's Grand Ballroom on Friday night. Chaired by Katy Siegel, it was titled "What Are Critics For?" and the four papers presented all did a good job of getting to the heart of the matter. Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe initiated the proceedings with a lively discussion of "The Implicit and Explicit Purposes of

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Criticism." The implicit dimension, "an evocation of a state of affairs that is yet to be," works under the explicit guise of offering "explanation and analyses of specific works of art." In other words, Gilbert-Rolfe suggested that critics should use journalistic reportage to subtly argue on behalf of a more general and far-reaching standard for art.

Ken Johnson followed by citing Northrop Frye's insight that art entails "the transfer of imaginative energy," leading Johnson to idealistically cast the critic as a kind of priest who is charged with extracting meaning from artistic tea leaves. Caroline Jones then advanced a thorough and well-informed examination of the complex relationship between the evolution of Jackson Pollock's paintings from the crucial 1943 to '45 period in relation to the complex influences of Greenberg's "picturing words" about the artist's development. Quoting Greenberg, she stated that critics were to be best understood as "manipulators of attention," an idea that seemed simultaneously to square with and subtly contradict Gilbert-Rolfe's notion that criticism contains the dialectic of "advertising and consumer protection."

All of the papers at this session were impressive for a variety of reasons, but the most overtly provocative of them was given by David Reed, not a critic himself, but an artist who is obviously a very astute and well-informed reader of art criticism. He came out and stated that the art world had been "taken in by wishful thinking," suggesting that the eventless and moribund state of contemporary art was a grim consequence of ideological chickens coming home to roost. The ideology in question was the pluralism of the 1970s, now rendered as an obsessive embrace of the sociological question of "Who gets to be an artist?" asked at the complete expense of any inquiry into what might or might not be a successful work of art. He also pointed to the things critics no longer do that in his view should be done, like advocating the causes of undiscovered talents and arguing passionately on behalf of their positions while simultaneously attacking those of other art critics. In short, Reed suggested that critics should return to the trenches of art where open contest and conflict are unavoidable facts of artistic life. Only in doing this could they hope to remain viable as participants in an otherwise

somnambulistic art scene. According to Reed, this inertia's most telling symptom is the studied heterogeneity of *Artforum's* annual top-ten lists. Invariably, these lists feature a cluster of well-known writers who are invited to compete with each other in a game of strategic bet-hedging while offering the amount of valuable insight that could be gained from the public announcement of their preferred ice-cream flavors.

Discussant Richard Shiff attributed a last *bon mot* to Thomas McEvelley, who was not present, but whose notion of criticism as an exegetical practice prior to being a polemic one hovered over the entire proceeding. McEvelley has written that "post-Modernism [represents] the end of an age of irrational dogma and communal folly." The communal folly in question is a Hegelian quest for mythical, historical dominance. In place of that folly, McEvelley asserts that Postmodern critics must pay careful attention to the contexts that determine how given instances of production are valued. When the magic works, as in the cases of critics like McEvelley or Donald Kuspit, we engage a rich labyrinth of sophisticated insight that brings a multitude of informed perspectives to a wide variety of art. But when the magic does not work, we read scores of lesser writers bending over backwards to earnestly yet promotionally explain works of art, without bothering to submit those works to any real analysis that would hold them accountable to a criterion of value. The models these lesser writers employ come from such genres as the catalogue essay and the celebrity profile, and this does a disservice to the field because critics defer the vexing questions of value to the market or to institutional biases. Certainly, this over-generalization doesn't characterize the work of all critics, but it does seem to describe a much higher percentage of what is published now as opposed to what was published even a decade ago.

I would submit that we are now in the grip of a very different kind of communal folly from the one McEvelley describes. I coined the neologism "adminidoxy" to explain that new folly, partly as a way of differentiating its particular brand of cynical fashion-consciousness from the more benign idea of "orthodoxy." The term also signals how completely hand-in-glove the forces of the academy and the market really are, for all of the supposed

antagonism between the so-called "democracy" of commerce and the "higher values" of the supposedly non-commercial. My neologism gives a name to an unforeseeable effect of the Postmodern turn that McEvelley described. Just because many art critics in the '70s, '80s, and '90s eschewed the Modernist partisan model in favor of the Postmodernist pluralist one did not mean that the rest of the art world would follow suit. It just meant that critics had an excuse to indulge their opportunism and cowardice by abdicating their traditional roles as tastemakers so that other "manipulators of attention" could take these roles over with impunity. Ostensibly, these new manipulators might be celebrity gallery owners, collectors, or museum directors, but their tactics for imbuing art with a kind of importance are increasingly bred by MTV-style marketing calculus. This process has in turn opened the floodgate of "marketing initiatives" that have transformed the art world from an arena of urgent cultural debate into just another corporate-sponsored roadside attraction—*pace* the Guggenheim Bilbao—taking its place amid our brave new world of cultural tourism. As Gilbert-Rolfe stated, "to pass from the pages of the *New Yorker* to those of *October* may suggest a change of tone and prose style, but not much of a change in assumption and belief."

For all of its much-proclaimed diversity of views, everything in the world of contemporary art now seems like everything else—that is, equally predictable and equally unimportant. Current writing has been agreeably and passively sycophantic to this revolving banality of changelessness for far too long. The beef alluded to in my title is hence not a high-protein meat product, but a state of impassioned conflict, as in the slang "having a beef with someone." It means a beef with adminidoxy and the all-too-ingratiating pseudo-polemics fostered by it. Critics in a state of infatuation with the sound of their own voices provide much information while saying next to nothing, thereby patronizing both artist and viewer. ♦

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*Thomas McEvelley, "The Art of Doubting," in *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt* (New York: Allworth Press, 1999), 26.

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