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Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, New York

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The background of the cover features a decorative pattern. The top half consists of several horizontal rows of small, gold-colored triangles pointing upwards. Below this, a large rectangular area is filled with thin, vertical, gold-colored lines. The main title is centered within this vertical-lined area.

EVER
WHAT HAPPENED
TO ART CRITICISM?
REAL

INSIDE

James Elkins Updates his 2003 Treatise on Art Criticism

MOMUS Editor Champions More Evaluative Criticism

Siegesmund and Spector on the Critic's Essential Role

Eight Noted Artists and Critics Offer their Own Opinions

MCA's Sprawling Show "I Was Raised on the Internet"

\$8 U.S.

New Art Examiner

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WANTED: WRITERS

The **New Art Examiner** is looking for writers interested in the visual arts in any major metropolitan area in the U.S. You would start with short reviews of exhibition in your area. Later, longer essays on contemporary visual art issues could be accepted.

Please send a sample of your writing (no more than a few pages) to:

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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The New Art Examiner is a publication whose purpose is to examine the definition and transmission of culture in our society; the decision-making processes within museums and schools and the agencies of patronage which determine the manner in which culture shall be transmitted; the value systems which presently influence the making of art as well as its study in exhibitions and books; and, in particular, the interaction of these factors with the visual art milieu.

EDITORIAL POLICY

As the New Art Examiner has consistently raised the issues of conflict of interest and censorship. We think it appropriate that we make clear to our readers the editorial policy we have evolved since our inception:

1. No writer may review an exhibition originated or curated by a fellow faculty member or another employee, or any past or present student, from the institution in which they are currently employed. The New Art Examiner welcomes enthusiastic and sincere representation, so the editor can assign such an exhibition to other writers without the burden of conflict of interest.
2. There shall be no editorial favor in response to the purchase of advertisements.
3. The New Art Examiner welcomes all letters to the Editor and guarantees publishing. Very occasionally letters may be slightly edited for spelling or grammar or if the content is considered to be libellous.
4. The New Art Examiner does not have an affiliation with any particular style or ideology, or social commitment that may be expressed or represented in any art form. All political, ethical and social commentary are welcome. The New Art Examiner has actively sought diversity. All opinions are solely of the writer. This applies equally to editorial staff when they pen articles under their own name.
5. The general mandate of the New Art Examiner is well defined in the statement of purpose above.

Contents

COVER IMAGE: Detail of cover of *What Happened to Art Criticism* by James Elkins. Image courtesy of University of Chicago Press.

What Ever Happened to Real Art Criticism?

3 Introduction

Most current writing about art claims to be criticism but is nothing of the sort. Descriptive writing is usually missing one crucial quality—critical judgment. This issue offers a package of essays and a revealing survey examining the issue of what real art criticism really entails.



4 Art Criticism Is Too Easy

JAMES ELKINS, a professor of art history and theory at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago, returns to the question he posed 15 years ago, “What Happened to Art Criticism?” and offers his updated analysis.



8 *MOMUS*: The Outpost of Evaluative Writing

An online publication out of Canada is making waves in critical circles with its ardent promotion of evaluative writing and the urging of true art criticism’s return. We present an interview with its editor, Sky Goodden.



10 Learning from What Criticism Once Was: John Berger’s Ways of Seeing

RICHARD SIEGESMUND, who teaches at Northern Illinois University, reflects on the thinking of a major mid-century art figure and his influential ideas on visual perception.



12 What Job Do Art Critics Do?

BUZZ SPECTOR, a noted conceptual artist and professor at Washington University in St. Louis, makes a spirited argument in favor of the art critic’s true purpose.

15 What Do Artists and Critics Think?

How do artists and critics incorporate ideas on art writing into their practice? We question four artists and four critics to glean their thoughts on this issue’s controversial theme.

Contents Continued

Reviews



21 “I Was Raised on the Internet”

NATHAN WORCESTER paid a visit to a sprawling exhibit at the Museum of Contemporary Art and reflected on its relevance to the Millennial generation.



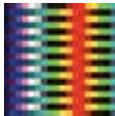
24 “Parallel Lives”

EVANGELINE REID found the art in the summer group show at Kavi Gupta Gallery arresting and the examination of parallel themes thought-provoking.



26 A Tackling Embrace

In the solo show at Andrew Bae Gallery, a recent graduate of the School of the Art Institute probes spatial awareness. EVAN CARTER calls the paintings “perceptual thermometers” and assesses the result.



27 “Spatial Ambiguity”

BRUCE THORN took in an exhibit at Hofheimer Gallery pairing two abstract painters who use prescribed geometric vocabularies and found the show thoroughly engaging.

Book Review



31 Abramović Explains Her Art to Freud

SHANNA ZENTNER reviews the book in which artist Marina Abramovic sat down with a psychotherapist to gain some insight into her personality and the motivation underlying her experiential projects.



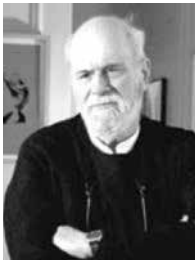
Harold Rosenberg



Clement Greenberg



Holland Cotter



Arthur Danto



Dave Hickey



Robert Hughes

WILL REAL ART CRITICISM EVER MAKE A COMEBACK?

Fifteen years ago, noted art writer James Elkins wrote a provocative pamphlet entitled, *What Happened to Art Criticism?* By then, evaluative criticism, the craft's leading mode, had been in decline for decades, pummeled by a combination of insurgent art movements, the art journal *October*, and French literary theorists.

Elkins notes that a fellow critic, Hal Foster, pointed to the generation of mid-1970s art critics and those writing for *Artforum* in the post-Greenberg era as working against criticism's identification of judgment. Conceptual art, minimalism and institutional critique also contributed to making art criticism inessential.

Elkins offered a useful taxonomy of the new standard: descriptive writing. Many critics adopted the strategy of avoiding judgments altogether in favor of evoking the art rather than talking about what they thought of it. He also offered *Seven Unworkable Cures* for reversing such a state of affairs.

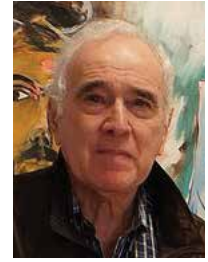
One can't deny that today's real judges of value aren't critics but auctions, art fairs, curators and mega-gallerists, like Larry Gagosian for one. The once-dominant custodians of artistic value have been left in the dust.

In the wake of descriptive criticism's ascendance and the loss of the art beat at many newspapers nationwide, a plethora of new forms now exist that pass for the real thing: gallery cards and four-page brochures, artist commentaries on their work, and peripheral journals (such as *Hyperallergic*, *Blouin Artinfo*, and *Flash Art*). And one can't forget all manner of opinion and dreaded listicles by so-called "critics" online. Such criticism only plays the art market's game in the end. Art media's standard must be higher and tougher.

While Elkins can't see a resurgence of real criticism, some editorial shoots are blooming against the prevailing orthodoxy. *MOMUS*, an online publication out of Toronto, has as its motto, "a return to art criticism." We feature an interview with its editor, Sky Goodden, in this issue. Such a cause is in order, she says, to "hold the contemporary moment up to the court of history and lay claim... for how we, and our time, will be understood."

Two contributors, Richard Siegesmund and Buzz Spector, argue forcefully in favor of evaluation as criticism's key value. Thus, our cover's question is meant to stoke renewed examination of critical writing's true purpose. Evaluation and judgment may be underdogs at present, but a spirited fight for the reoccupation of its historic place in art history has only just begun.

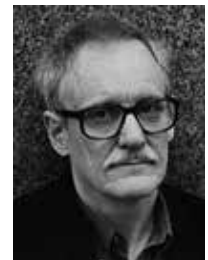
Tom Mullaney is the New Art Examiner's Managing Editor



Donald Kuspit



Jerry Saltz



Peter Schjeldahl



Hans Ulrich Obrist



James Yood



Dennis Adrian

Art Criticism Is Too Easy

by James Elkins



James Elkins

It's been sixteen years since the October roundtable on art criticism, fifteen years since my pamphlet, *What Happened to Art Criticism?*, and eleven years since my book, *The State of Art Criticism*.¹

The pamphlet made the claim that art

critics had turned from judging—which they did since the Greeks—to describing, evoking, and praising.

I didn't have an explanation for that turn, but it was wonderfully quantified by a Columbia University National Arts Journalism survey of North American art critics, which proved that the majority of the country's top critics—as measured by the number of readers of their publications, not their content—thought that a critic's job is to describe and not to judge.²

There is a lot to say about that turn. It's partly an effect of the art market and its understandable lack of interest in bad reviews. It can also be correlated with the rise of conceptual art, minimalism, and the anti-aesthetic, all of which drove serious criticism into the academy. But the main social effect of the turn is that it provokes resistance: many critics don't want to think of themselves as people who just describe art.

The feeling that art criticism is in retreat continues to inspire a steady stream of conferences with titles like "Crisis of Art Criticism," "Future of Art Criticism," and "End of Art Criticism." In the years since my pamphlet appeared, I have attended conferences and lectured on the subject in Colombia, Belgium, France, the UK, Ireland, Norway, Denmark, Estonia, Russia, Germany, South Africa, Uganda, the Netherlands, Portugal, South Korea, Japan, Australia, and China, and I have published several essays on the state of art criticism.³

A big book is currently being edited by Steve Knudsen at the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD); it has essays by Arthur Danto, Peter Schjeldahl, Luis Camnitzer, Blake Gopnik, and Barry Schwabsky, among many others.⁴ I've also made a study of what

counts as judgment in art criticism (short answer: no one knows), and whether or not art criticism is becoming—or already is—a global phenomenon, essentially the same no matter where in the world it's practiced.⁵

This is all by way of saying I try to keep up with the field, even though of course it's impossible for any one person to read more than an infinitesimal percentage of the criticism written in English, not to mention the many traditions of criticism that are written in other languages.

...conceptual art, minimalism, and the anti-aesthetic...drove serious criticism into the academy.

So how do things look in 2018? Here are some quick answers:

(1) Art criticism is not returning to judgment. That change is a long-term shift, from a modernist perspective to a postmodern (or postcolonial, or metamodern, or "contemporary") one.

(2) Art criticism is proliferating, but there is no reason to assume that it is read in proportion to its volume. Who reads all the comments on YouTube videos? Who reads all of e-flux?

(3) Most art criticism is conventional. There is a lot of truth to the claim that art writing has become a sort of grammatically complexified, academically hypnotized, awkwardly written, polysyllabic "International Art English."⁶ (Think of *October's* many descendants.) On the other hand, much online art criticism today is studiously informal and conversational, featuring generous displays of plain speaking, corn, slang, confidences, and in-jokes. (Think of Jerry Saltz, whose writing gets weird when it's sober.) The two kinds of writing are usually posed as opposites, but they are both conventional. The one is as predictable as the other.

Art criticism is not returning to judgment. That change is a long-term shift, from a modernist perspective to a postmodern...one.

There is a lot of truth to the claim that art writing has become a sort of grammatically complexified, academically hypnotized, awkwardly written, polysyllabic “International Art English.”

What’s to be done? There are some initiatives outside academia to revive art criticism. (I count *Nonsite*, *Grey Room*, and others as academic: their papers correspond closely in length, mode of argument, and potential readership to essays in *October* and elsewhere.) Among recent non-academic publications, *n+1* stands out, and so does some of e-flux, *MOMUS*, and *Hyperallergic*, among many others.

MOMUS’s subtitle is “A Return to Art Criticism,” and it promises “art criticism that is evaluative, accountable, and brave.” Some of the writing does that, but I think it could do more. Kristian Madsen’s review of Manifesta 12, for example, raises important points about biennales: the work in Palermo is often documentary, he says, full of “geopolitical information,” and driven by causes and messages; it plays to the liberal art world that doesn’t need convincing; and it doesn’t make use of art’s strengths, which he lists as “ambiguity, abstraction, self-consciousness.”⁷ “Who’s all this for?” Madsen asks at one point.

The essay, “Courting Exhaustion: Manifesta’s Dog Days,” is certainly “evaluative,” but, in order to make a lasting contribution to the literature on Manifesta or biennales, it needs to be expanded: there’s no reason not to consider biennale culture in general (here he could have made use of John Clark’s dyspeptic criticism), and he could have been more historically reflective about his criteria (ambiguity, abstraction, and self-consciousness aren’t simply art’s strengths; they have histories and politics of their own in modernism).

Even in publications like *MOMUS*, where art criticism can be pointed and argumentative, it also tends to be impressionistic, informal, and not linked to the historical and philosophic discourses that underwrite its concerns.

One solution is brief notes on very specific issues. For me the exemplar here is Hal Foster, who has worked this way for a decade or more. He writes position papers—short polemics couched as reviews—in places like the *London Review of Books* (for example, a review of Hito Steyerl’s *Duty Free Art*⁸), *Grey Room*, and *Texte zur Kunst* (for instance, a review of Ruben

Östlund’s *The Square*⁹). The short format and narrow focus help him define and clarify particular positions.

Another strategy is to consolidate your criticism into books. A good example is Jan Verwoert, some of whose essays have been collected by Sternberg Press in association with the Piet Zwart Institute in Rotterdam.¹⁰ In Cork, Ireland, I once had a disagreement with Jan about the reading public for art criticism. I said it was scattered and often unknowable, and I cited the fact that conferences on the “crisis of art criticism” tend to reinvent the wheel because the organizers don’t always know the literature.

He said I was wrong, and that, from his point of view, the world of readers of art criticism was coherent, knowable, and engaged, and that work could be done with the knowledge that previous texts would be taken into account. His experience is not mine, but I hope he is more right than I am.

Here, to end, are three more examples of writing that I consider interesting art criticism. These are more radical than Foster or Verwoert: they are neither colloquial “plain style” nor intricate IAE (International Art English). I name them just to suggest how many more possibilities there are for art criticism.

(1) Fausto De Sanctis’s *Money Laundering Through Art: A Criminal Justice Perspective* is an example of work that considers the global art market not as a place where identities are constructed or oppositional voices are articulated (as academic writing generally proposes), nor as a place where the global economy is on display (as financial reporting on the arts usually implies), but as an opportunity for money laundering.¹¹

Among recent non-academic publications, *n+1* stands out, and so does some of e-flux, *MOMUS*, and *Hyperallergic*...

The people involved need to have some expertise in visual art, cultural heritage, and the antiquities trade, but those specialties can often be obtained by hiring specialists.¹² De Sanctis does not intend to write art criticism, but his approach is in effect a complete change from the status quo in art criticism: he is unconcerned about aesthetics, history, or meaning – in fact he’s even more detached than sociologists of art such as Pierre Bourdieu. For De Sanctis, all that matters is understanding the art market well enough to see how best to intervene.

(2) Craig Clunas's *Elegant Debts: The Social Art of Wen Zhengming* is an outstanding example of what happens when social art history is consistent about its commitment to political and social meaning.¹³ The artist Wen Zhengming (1470–1559) was one of the principal scholar (or *literati*) inkbrush painters of the Ming Dynasty, as prominent in Chinese painting history as, say, Poussin or Bernini in Europe.

Clunas's book is unique not only in context of studies of Wen Zhengming or Chinese inkbrush painting, but also in the much larger field of social art history. Clunas says next to nothing about Wen's compositions. His concern is nearly exclusively the value that Wen's paintings had as objects of gift exchange in the social network of Ming Dynasty scholars and bureaucrats.

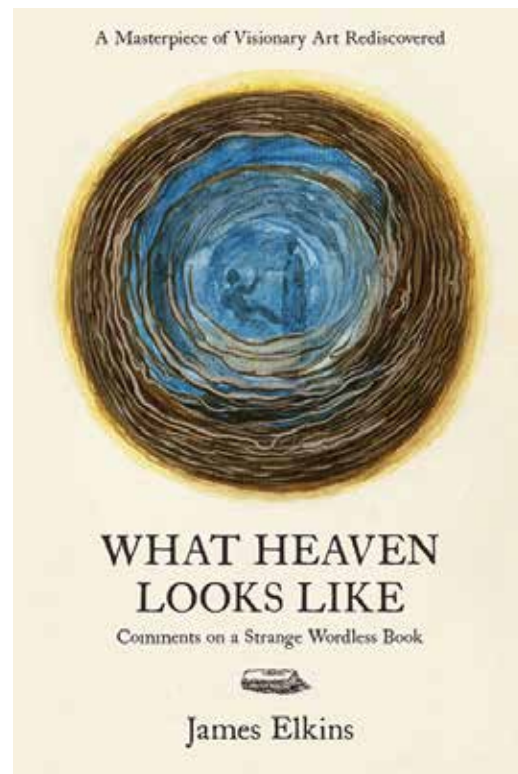
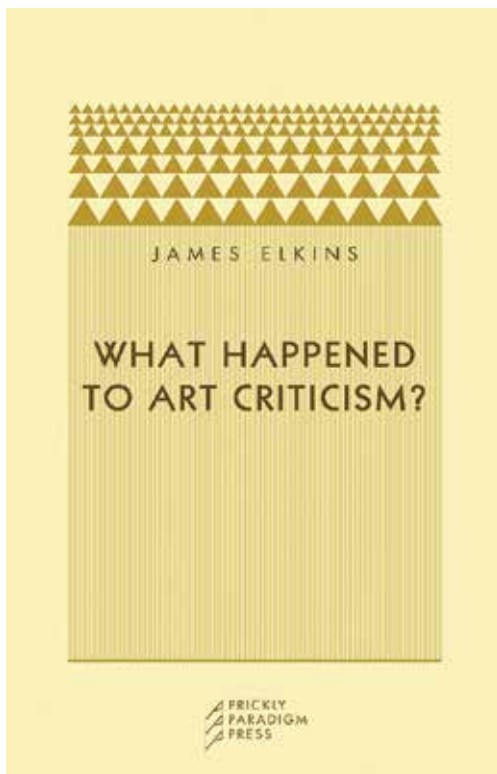
Like other scholar-painters, Wen used his paintings in trade, and Clunas did a great deal of archival work to show exactly how that was done. The book is therefore deeply counterintuitive because Wen's paintings are not treated as visual objects. The book is a tremendous accomplishment in counter-intuitive art criticism, demonstrating that social interactions can be as rich and nuanced a way to understand art as formal analysis and the other conventional tools of visual interpretation.¹⁴

(3) Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* is, among many other things, a work of experimental art criticism. There are indices of hundreds of actual artworks

that Proust refers to in the book; in that respect, it is one of the most thorough records of conservative early 20th century French taste. It also has a famous theory of art, which divides aesthetic memories into intentional and inadvertent.

What makes it experimental art criticism is the fact that, in several crucial passages, Proust mixes fiction and nonfiction in the description of visual art. There is an intensely visual description of a church in the invented town of Combray; the literary critic Germaine Brée argued that when Proust wrote the passage he was looking at a reproduction of Vermeer's *View of Delft*.¹⁵

The art historian Benjamin Binstock has suggested that, later in the novel, when Proust describes Vermeer's painting, he was not looking either at the original or a reproduction, because he focuses on a small detail—a yellow wall—that is not present in the painting. In the course of Proust's six volumes, these relations become substantially more complex. The church at Combray is connected to other churches, and Vermeer's painting is connected to other paintings. The result is a fusion of an actual painting, a reproduction of that painting, a memory of that reproduction, other fictional and nonfictional paintings, and an imaginary church. Considered as art criticism, *In Search of Lost Time* is significantly more radical and complex than contemporary art writing.¹⁶



Even in publications like *MOMUS*, where art criticism can be pointed and argumentative, it also tends to be impressionistic, informal, and not linked to the historical and philosophic discourses that underwrite its concerns.

These three books are not normative art criticism, and I wouldn't want them to be. I chose them to show there are many ways to write about art. Discussions about the "crisis" of art criticism—its disappearance from print media, its descent into academic jargon, its dissolution in the unread reaches of the internet—all bypass the fact that it is increasingly predictable. I would like to be seriously challenged by art criticism: I want to not recognize what I'm reading, not understand the claims, and not see the structure. I'd like art criticism to make good on the values it celebrates in art: difficulty, novelty, independence, modernism. ■

James Elkins is an art historian and art critic. He is the E.C. Chadbourne Professor of Art History, Theory and Criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. His most recent book is *What Heaven Looks Like*. All comments welcome via jameselkins.com.

Notes:

- 1 *What Happened to Art Criticism?* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press [distributed by University of Chicago Press], 2003), now also in Chinese, Spanish, and Swedish; *The State of Art Criticism*, co-edited with Michael Newman, vol. 4 of *The Art Seminar*, with contributions by Stephen Melville, Dave Hickey, Irit Rogoff, Guy Brett, Katy Deepwell, Joseph Masheck, Peter Plagens, Julian Stallabrass, Alex Alberro, Whitney Davis, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, and others (New York: Routledge, 2007).
- 2 Currently online at tinyurl.com/y8xkvozu.
- 3 The two most recent are (1) the "Afterword," in *Judgment and Contemporary Art Criticism*, edited by Jeff Khonsary and Melanie O'Brian (Vancouver: Artspeak, Fillip Editions, 2010); this is a response to Diedrich Diederichsen, Maria Fusco, Tom Morton, Jeff Derksen, Sven Lütticken, and Tirdad Zolghadr, and (2) an essay, "Why Thinking about Judgment in Art Criticism is Difficult," forthcoming in a conference volume on the state of judgment in art criticism, from Ruhr University Bochum and the Leuphana University of Lüneburg, edited by Stephanie Marchal.

- 4 *The Art of Critique*, edited by Stephen Knudsen, forthcoming; I wrote the Introduction, "Art Critiques: Forgotten Children of the Academy," which responds to each of the book's essays.
- 5 The latter is "Are Art Criticism, Art Theory, Art Instruction, and the Novel Global Phenomena?," *Journal of World Philosophies* 3 (2018), online; the essay is a chapter in a book called *The Impending Single History of Art*, and it is posted as a Google Doc online at tinyurl.com/yb3kg7oz.
- 6 Alix Rule and David Levine, "International Art English," *Triple Canopy*, 2012, online at www.canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/international_art_english.
- 7 Kristian Madsen, "Courting Exhaustion: Manifesta's Dog Days," *Momus.ca*, momus.ca/courting-exhaustion-manifestas-dog-days (July 6, 2018).
- 8 Hal Foster, "Smash the Screen," *London Review of Books*, April 5, 2018, behind the paywall.
- 9 www.textezurkunst.de/109/transgression-vigilance
- 10 COOKIE!, edited by Vivian Sky Rehberg and Marnie Slater (Sternberg Press, 2014), www.sternberg-press.com/?pageId=1490.
- 11 Berlin: Springer Verlag, 2013.
- 12 See Beatriz Picard, "Art Market and Money Laundering: A Pretty Disguise for an Ugly Reality," 2018, paper available on academia.edu.
- 13 University of Hawai'i Press / London: Reaktion, 2004.
- 14 I have written about the consequences of this approach in *Chinese Landscape Painting as Western Art History*, with an introduction by Jennifer Purtle (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), reviewed in *International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) Newsletter* 57 (2011), *Art Bulletin* 93 no. 2 (2011): 249–52, and *History and Theory* 51 (February 2012).
- 15 Proust's description of the church is enhanced by painterly sorts of details. There is a striking line, for example, about "flakes and gum-like dribbles of sun," *des ecailles et des egouttements gommeux de soleil*.
- 16 See Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, translated by C. K. Scott Moncrieff, Terence Kilmartin, and D. J. Enright, 2003, vol. 1, pp. 58–9, 252, 256; Brée, "Proust's Combray Church: Illiers or Vermeer?," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 112, 1968, pp. 5–7; and Binstock, *Vermeer's Family Secrets: Genius, Discovery, and the Unknown Apprentice*, 2008. This is discussed in a book I am co-authoring with Erna Fiorentini, *Visual Worlds* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming). Other examples of adventurous writing in this sense, especially criticism that mixes fact and invention: Jean-Louis Schefer's radical book on Uccello, discussed on my site "What is Interesting Writing in Art History?," on Lulu or at tinyurl.com/ya3thvfa; and Gilles Deleuze's approach to the reproductions of Bacon in the original French edition of his book *Logic of Sensation* (the English translation is not illustrated, which ruins Deleuze's visual project), on Academia.edu or tinyurl.com/ya3pxdn9.

MOMUS: The Outpost of Evaluative Writing

While many newspapers have shown their art critics the door, the most exciting news in the field is occurring on social media platforms and, in the case of *MOMUS*, outside the U.S. in Toronto, Canada. Sky Goodden founded the online publication nearly four years ago after leaving her job as the Canadian correspondent for Blouin Artinfo. She spoke with Examiner editor Tom Mullaney, highlighting *MOMUS*'s record of success against current critical orthodoxy and identifying online publishing's remaining challenges.

TM: When did you found *MOMUS*, and what made you feel the need for such a publication?

SG: I founded *MOMUS* in October 2014 to address what I perceived to be a dearth of evaluative, brave, accessible, and accountable art criticism. I wanted to contribute an online publication to the field that helped “slow down the internet” and compelled readers to engage deeply with issues of integrity in contemporary art and its criticism. It's a corrective to a conversation that had skewed too populist, or alternatively, deadeningly academic—and the merits of real evaluation in contemporary art, for analysis and consideration and larger contexts, stakes, and historical consequences—were being flattened into punchy provocation, at best. Mostly I was seeing a sea of description, or “art writing,” that reads dangerously promotionally.

As I write in the introduction to our first print anthology, which we put out last year: “Our vision from the outset was to provide a reprieve from—and rebuke against—the toxic poles of elitism and populism that frame so much public conversation. We advanced a mandate of “a return to art criticism,” seeking to contribute skepticism without cynicism; accessibility without infantilism; and an imperative, both aesthetic and political, to read a cultural text more deeply.”

TM: *MOMUS* is classified as a for-profit entity. Does support mainly come from subscribers, grants or the group of “Patrons” listed in the *MOMUS* 2017 anthology?

SG: Support for the publication comes mostly from advertisers. We have had a thread of support, as well, from patrons, which has been meaningful in manifold ways in these first fledgling years. In Canada, we're very lucky to have (fairly) healthy granting bodies in reach. *MOMUS* has received grant support for the

podcast we put out, and we hope to be greeted with more for the publication in the coming years.

TM: Your editorial motto is “A return to art criticism.” What do you define as your critical standard? Is it writing that you have mentioned as “brave, evaluative and accessible”?

SG: There's nothing that standardizes art criticism, especially not in this time of proliferating and experimental approaches, though evaluation is essential to it. Beyond that, we are simply looking for a writer to say a thing that needs to be said. Something that adds value, whether to a historical or emerging discourse on art, or to the forms that criticism can take.

To our “mantles” that you point out, yes, we like to see our writers demonstrating bravery—there should be a stake in the writing, even if it's aesthetic. And we're seeking accountability in evaluation: can you support what you're seeing and writing? These aspects are crucial to what we look for as well. Then there's that tricky word of “accessibility,” which we don't like to put too fine a point on, as contemporary art has a vernacular like anything else, except to say that these conversations should be inviting. The writing shouldn't be bricked up with references or exuding a self-pleased opacity. The texts should breathe and flow and feel good to read.

TM: How do you ensure that writers produce evaluative writing?

SG: You ensure evaluation at the pitch level, with a writer. You insist, as editors, on making clear not just the “hook,” but the value judgment in a forthcoming piece. And I'm not saying that every single piece will have one—we do publish a few authors who fall under the larger canopy of “art writing,” and we work with them because we love their form. But by and large, our motivating question is, what needs saying and how well can you say it?

TM: Do you agree with writer Saelan Twerdy's observation that “a return to art criticism” implies it has



Sky Goodden

been in decline and marginalized? To what forces do you attribute that decades-long decline?

SG: Yes, of course, it's implicit in our motto. There are competing arguments about why there was a decline in art criticism—in its proliferation, remuneration, and its discursive value. These are all well documented by [James] Elkins himself, of course. They include the rise of a theory-led discourse in the '80s and '90s, the surge of the market's influence and, tied in with that, the speed at which art was moving from studio to gallery to auction block.

It didn't leave much space for the evaluation of art, or at least not one taking the form of criticism. It helped propel more promotional "art writing," and we began to see a punched-up and commercially purposeful kind of noise. Word counts got shorter, attention spans were deemed to be declining. With all this, there was the economic shift of print to online publishing, and the diminishment of staff positions at papers and magazines.

This wasn't helped by the web's proto-publishing days in which pay rates were utterly devastated. There are a lot of contributing factors, and many critics disagree on the leading cause—but, in hindsight, it can be seen to be a moment of tectonic plates shifting, after which we have begun to see a revitalized moment emerge.

TM: What gives you grounds for optimism that evaluative writing is enjoying a resurgence? What publications do you see as part of this insurgency?

SG: In their rhizomatic reading habits and relative impatience, online readers essentially demand better writing; writing that has a point up top and a strong, clear voice. Criticism should have a sense of urgency, some stakes, an angle—and also great pacing. We're seeing publications heed all this, with a lot of their best art writing being published in their online iterations over print. We're fans of 4Columns.org, among others.

TM: Do you feel there is more receptivity to your ideas on criticism and *MOMUS*'s mission in Canada than in the U.S.?

SG: No, not really. The issues endemic to a weak discourse are international. However, Canada is a smaller art community and one with its unique and affecting conditions, like an influential granting body and the absence of a market. So we need evaluation here to keep conservative—or just plain boring—art at bay. We need it to hold one another accountable, instead of

letting these conversations drive underground and rot the house from beneath.

TM: Since descriptive criticism is now the overwhelming norm, how well do you think you are faring in your crusade for a return to more evaluative writing? One of our writers, James Elkins, says he finds many of *MOMUS*'s articles more descriptive.

SG: I'm surprised to hear him say that; I'd venture that he hasn't been reading enough of the publication. As I mentioned above, we work with a few writers, like Andrew Berardini in Los Angeles, whose target isn't evaluation but experimentation with the form. He pushes for intimacy and does a gorgeous job of elevating the diaristic approach in art writing to something that feels encompassing—something that, as it is quite rare in recent decades, approaches a subjective universalism. That collective "we." But I'd be curious to unfold that conversation with Elkins. I'm curious how he feels after his alarm-bell ringing of the early aughts. Where are we now? Is the crisis over?

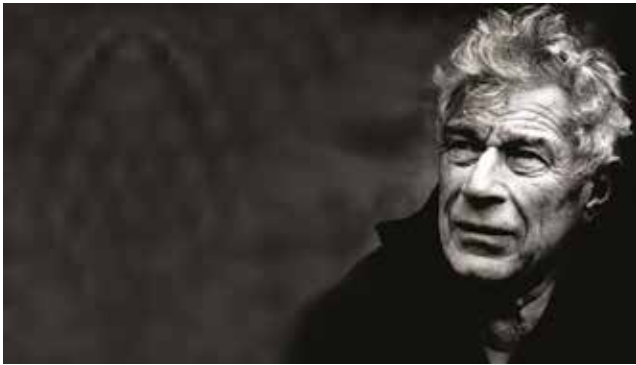
As for the "crusade," *MOMUS* is happily one of several publications striving for a better discourse in art criticism since our inauguration. We're in the midst, and I'd like to think leading, a repopulating field that generally shows its strength online. The online platform is still young, and so, while publishers were quite cynical out of the gates, I think, with "clickbait" and cheap news-cycle mirroring, more of us are beginning to appreciate that readers want value over volume.

Further, that the most urgent conversations happening in criticism happen across social media now, which can naturally extend to, and be in discussion with, and take its start from online publishing. So for critics, the speed at which we're able to talk to one another, now—and hold one another accountable—is thrilling. Our overhead is low, our fluidity and ease-of-motion and real-time thinking [is] better than ever. And there's been a healthy democratization to the form.

The only major thing that still needs addressing in the contemporary moment of art criticism is remuneration. Online publishing needs to begin stepping-up its appreciation for "content" if we want the conversation to continue elevating. It's time to invest in this model more meaningfully. ■

Learning from What Criticism Once Was: John Berger's Ways of Seeing

by Richard Siegesmund



John Berger

John Berger (1926-2017) didn't consider himself an art critic; he was a storyteller. In Berger's mind, critics made judgments, dispensed ridicule, and praised. In his mind, none of this had anything to do with art. This kind of petty score-keeping and score-settling turned art into a commodity. This was only useful to a capitalist art market eager to turn a buck, and Berger was an unrepentant Marxist to the end.

As a storyteller, he was an award-winning novelist, poet, and playwright. He was a keen commentator on Western art with his essays regularly appearing in the left-leaning *New Statesman*. Eschewing university study following secondary school, Berger initially pursued a career in drawing and painting, and he eventually taught art at St. Mary's University, Twickenham.

His fame in popular culture largely stemmed from his 1972 BBC television series, *Ways of Seeing*, and the book of the same title that followed thereafter. Here he broke radically with the art historical orthodoxy of his time that was intent on establishing a solemn art historical canon.

In the opening to the first program—before the first credits roll—Berger walks up to what appears to be Botticelli's *Venus and Mars* at the National Gallery in London, pulls a box cutter out of his pocket and cuts out the female face to vividly illustrate two of his main themes: the dissolution of perception through the decontextualization of image reproduction, and Western art's primary focus on the objectification of women.

Ways of Seeing, now seen as a classic text, remains in print. The full television series is available on YouTube.

For Berger, we close off perception when we stop attending to the materiality of artwork—the stuff of which it is made and the artist's struggle with that stuff—and replace our sense with the banal skills of recognition or the selfish pleasures of the gaze.

In the case of Botticelli's *Venus and Mars*, recognition demands the identification of the symbols in the painting and a recitation of the allegory depicted. For Berger, such activities are intellectual rubbish. Worse, they pose as socially acceptable cover for the male gaze that is cast over a reclining, supplicant Venus and a homoerotic Mars.

Berger's scream in the night for rethinking perception came at a moment when the canon of western art history was becoming big business. Figures like Ernst Gombrich (*The Story of Art*, 1950), Sir Kenneth Clark (*Civilisation*, 1969), and H.W. Jansen (*History of Art*, 1962) were promoting (and profiting from) a top-down view of art where herds of unwitting undergraduates around the world were corralled into mind-numbing World Art survey courses—each of whom was required to purchase the accompany art historical survey text.

As a committed Marxist seeking social justice, Berger saw this industry as educational abuse. There was no interest in art. The focus was about making money. The herding and corraling continue to the present day.

Instead of the commodification of art (made possible through the mass reproduction of images in print and slide format), Berger maintained that serious art probed pathways out of an exploitive capitalist system. For Berger, artists gave us avenues and perspectives into how we might live fully sensual individual and communal lives.

Berger, who was deeply attached to the 17th century Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza, believed in the embodied mind. Great art touches sense by bringing the viewer into a relationship with the precognitive materialism of the world. Artists help us to see corporeal materiality so that we can be more fully attentive. Art has nothing to do with what we collect and what we own.

An essay that I return to, as it succinctly captures Berger's viewpoint toward significance in art, is his close critique of a painting by the obscure Turkish artist "Şeker" Ahmed Pasha. Berger acknowledges that the painting could easily be dismissed as the work of a provincial artist who struggled unsuccessfully with the Western conventions of perspective. However, Berger finds in this work an authentic reassembling of the perception of place that, in turn, alters our conception of time. In so doing, the artist offers us a new perspective of what it means to live within the world. For Berger, this is art.

Unfortunately, the art world was moving in the opposite direction of Berger's interests. Instead of resisting the commercial withering of meaning through the visual equivalency of images, postmodern art actively embraced and celebrated this idea. Critical post-structuralist approaches of postmodernism (as represented for example in the writing of literary theorist Roland Barthes or philosopher Jacques Derrida) held that there was no fundamental materiality to the world. There was no *there* there.

For post-structuralists, shifting enigmas of signs and symbols are merely constructs, like a kaleidoscope, that continually change meanings. We incessantly construct and perform the world through our own schematic lenses and critical discourse. We spin our worlds through fragmented words.

This view was best expressed through the art journal *October* and its editors, who included Rosalind Krauss, Douglas Crimp, Benjamin Buchloh, and Hal Foster. The *October* editorial position also critiqued the art world from a leftist lens. From its perspective, Berger's efforts reflected a quaint, essentialist realism that was better replaced by more theoretical psychological approaches (such as those championed by philosopher Gilles Deleuze and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan), which held that through our mental framework we build the parameters for our abilities to see and act.

Although a post-structuralist approach seemingly challenged the economics of the contemporary art world, nevertheless, through its insistence of the relativity of meaning, the aims of art and industry merged, and the financial engine of the art world soared. As Berger feared, art was utterly commodified by capitalism. Berger self-exiled himself to a subsistence peasant farming community in the French Alps where he remained until his death.

Today, postmodernism and post-structuralism are receding. New posts emerge. We are moving away

from conceptualizing the human mind and human will as the center of the universe. Human beings are not radical free agents who deconstruct and reconstruct meaning. In its place, we recognize the agency of things that co-habit the world. Humans do not control the universe; we are in relationship to the substances that compose it. This perspective is post-humanist (feminist physicist Karen Barad refers to it as agential realism). Could this be a moment to revisit Berger's commitment to materialism and his grounding in fully-embodied experience as a negotiation with essential empiricism that resists and plays against human will?

Berger's relationship to the world reminds us of what criticism could be again. Berger was not interested in art that offered rhetorical opinions. Berger sought to understand how art vitalizes us to live in the contiguity of time's continuity and context of place. The 2016 documentary film, *The Seasons in Quincy: Four Portraits of John Berger*, produced a year before his death by his close friend, the actress Tilda Swinton, captures this sensibility.

The deconstructive, reflexive practice of postmodernist theorists can, to some degree, serve as a critical lens for recognizing the forms of power that neo-liberal society insidiously imposes to restrict thought and transform art into a profit system.

But art that only draws attention to these constructions is merely political at best and pontificating at worst. Berger points the way both back and to the future of an art, and art criticism, that begins in experiential encounters with materialism. How artists orchestrate such moments is a task for critics (or, as Berger would have preferred, storytellers) to reveal. ■

Richard Siegesmund has contributed to the *New Art Examiner* since 1980. He currently serves as Assistant Director of the Northern Illinois University School of Art and Design. His most recent book is the second edition of *Arts-Based Research in Education: Foundations for Practice* (Routledge).



What Job Do Art Critics Do?

By Buzz Spector

Here's a job description for a course of study in becoming a critic of a contemporary art form. I've left off the discipline, and also the website where I found this, so that I can offer you the "what else" portion of the ad:

"_____ critics evaluate and rate ... and share their critiques in print or [online] ... As part of their job _____ critics may evaluate several [exhibits, performances, books, movies, concerts, readings, dance events] a week ... They generally discuss the goals and meanings of the [works] they analyze and give reviews that are entertaining and insightful."

This about sums it up except that the term "description" is missing.

In the currently somewhat lonely precincts of art criticism, there's considerable umbrage being taken against descriptive criticism. On several art and design school websites, I've read prompts about "Writing Art Reviews,"ⁱ "Writing a Review of an Exhibition,"ⁱⁱ or "Art Criticism and Writing: an Introduction."ⁱⁱⁱ

Description shows up near the top of the criteria list for the first of these. In the second case, the term appears on page three (of thirteen) from a 2005 essay by Sylvan Barnet, while the course summary in my third selection doesn't mention *description* at all. If the academy is of mixed feelings about the role of description, many artworld publications or blogs, in print or onscreen, are vehement in castigating reviewers who content themselves with describing works of art.

This disdain places descriptiveness in the way of judgment, as if describing the way something looks was an aspect of writing neutral in effect; a deferral, if you will, of the value of opinionizing. Behind this concern, on the writers' part, with the existential criteria of evaluation, is the shared concern that critics are increasingly thought to be, and related to, as art collection advisors without portfolio. As Dave Hickey puts it, "Art editors and critics—people like me—have become a courtier class. All we do is wander around the palace and advise very rich people."^{iv}

I can see Hickey's point about what art criticism can be used for in the reductive field of collection management, but there are plenty of actual art consultants out there to whisper sweet nothings in the ears of the



Buzz Spector, *Suicide Note*, 2005, Collaged postcards and vellum on handmade paper, 9 x 6 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

monied, and I'm willing to claim that none of those people ever describes the property they're encouraging someone else to buy. Such stuff is already visible in auction house catalogs, institutionally published artist monographs, museum walls, or corporate lobbies.

No, description is an action of criticism when the value being assessed isn't *a priori* monetized. That is to say, when the art critic describes the objects of art, the premise is one of setting in place a line of reasoning which is the basis for the conclusion, the passing of judgment. Judgment is something that arises reasonably from the descriptive terms that precede it.

Every artwork has a multitude of aspects, so its description can realistically engage only some qualities of materiality and affect. Critical writing with too much description risks confusing readers who can't see the work itself. The basic descriptive elements include

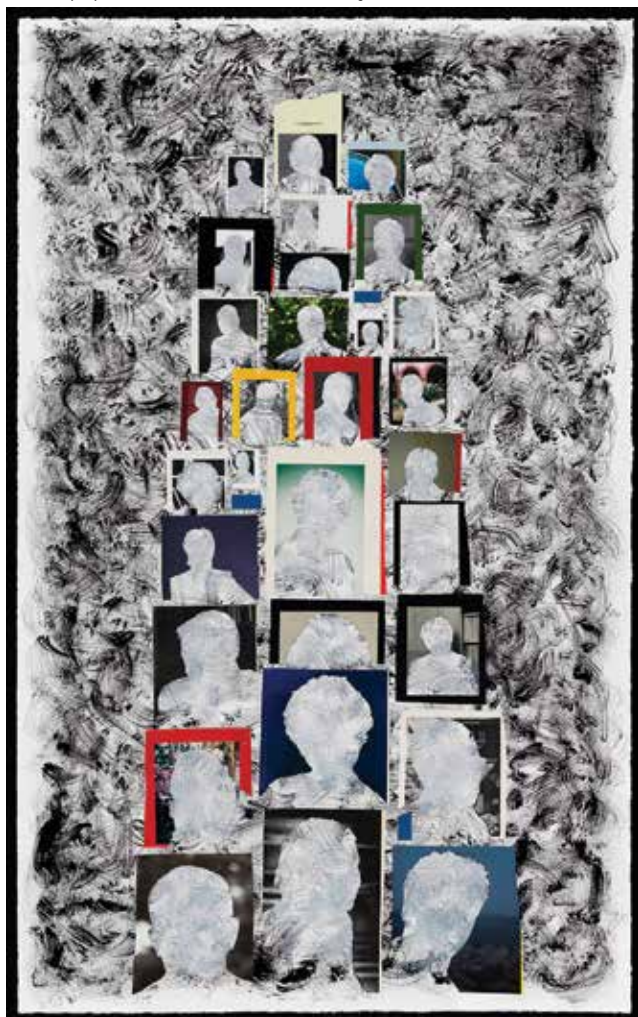
title, if any, date of completion, and at least an informal characterization of size.

Other qualities, of material composition, surface color and texture and, ultimately, subject matter are also important, but the order in which such aspects are read is also a ranking of their importance in relation to the value judgments you want your readers to grasp. But describing only the work is a failure in addressing the conditions of its visibility.

One of my favorite writers on this subject is Joshua Decter, who frames art critical practice thusly: “Each time one writes art criticism, one is not only writing about art but also writing *about* art criticism.”^v The essay where this appears is titled “Art Criticism Always Arrives Too Late,” and Decter observes, pointedly, that the relationship in time of critical writing to the art it assesses is after the fact: “an exhibition opens, the art critic visits the show, offers an interpretation, and renders a judgment.”^{vi}

This problem of temporal lag appears elsewhere in the field. In 1990, I designed the exhibition catalog for

Buzz Spector, *Tower #1*, 2016, Collaged dust jacket elements on ink on paper, 60 x 24 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



a show, “nonrepresentation,” curated by Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe. The other catalog essayist, Colin Gardner, noted a crucial distinction between nonrepresentational and abstract art: “By definition, the abstract object or image is a reduction (abstraction) from a signified that existed prior to it. In other words, like representation, abstraction harkens back to something that existed in a past present that is now significant for its ABSENCE [capitalization his].”^{vii}

Gardner points out the inherent incompleteness of nonrepresentational art because such work is contingent on its viewing and context. I regard such contingency as necessary to all art. As I have said elsewhere when speaking of photographs, “there are no subjects, only situations.” But this is true about life, too. You had to be there.

With wry humor, Decter hypothesizes a possible criticism that precedes the art which is its subject, “so as to prevent certain art from happening in the first place, which would help both the artist and the potential art audiences.”^{viii} Every application of judgment is inherently allegorical; things persist in the world—and the singular thingness of art is its distinguishing characteristic—but the meanings we ascribe to them change over time.

I’ve long thought that this ascription of meaning is the job that critics do, to share the mechanisms of judgment that arise from the interrelatedness of artists, viewers, and context, making possible more expansive ways of connecting the reading of the work in space to the writing of it in time. ■

Buzz Spector will retire in 2019 as professor of art in the Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts at Washington University in St. Louis. He looks forward to more time in his studio and at his writing desk.

Notes:

- i Writing & Learning Centre, OCAD University, www.ocadu.ca/wlc.htm
- ii https://www.csus.edu/indiv/o/obriene/art112/Readings/Writing_a_Review_of_an_Exhibition.pdf
- iii <https://nodecenter.net/course/art-criticism>
- iv <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2012/oct/28/art-critic-dave-hickey-quits-art-world>
- v Joshua Decter, “Art criticism always arrives too late” <http://www.contemporaryartstavanger.no/art-criticism-always-arrives-late/>
- vi *ibid.*
- vii Colin Gardner, “nonrepresentation: Presence in the Absence,” 1990
- viii Decter, *ibid.*

What Do Artists and Critics Think?

Now that we've heard from our trio of academic art theorists, we thought a good idea might be to check in with a sample of artists and critics whose practice is with paint and prose. The Examiner was curious to see if the artists pay any attention to the critics and if the critics are familiar with their past colleagues and the critical tradition.

We began with a foundational question: Should the focus in art criticism be more in favor of evaluative or descriptive writing? Since descriptive criticism is now the overwhelming standard, we wanted to learn what factors our respondents thought had contributed most to the decline in evaluation that prevailed from the Greeks until the first signs of decline in the 1960s with Pop Art and the later appearance of conceptual art, earth art and post-structuralist theory.

The panel of four artists and four critics offered very thoughtful responses that we think you will find enlightening. We hope they may even sharpen your own thinking on the topic.

Stephen F. Eisenman
Professor of Art History,
Northwestern University



Q: Do you think art criticism should be more focused on evaluation or descriptive criticism?

A: I think you can't have one without the other. I had a conservative art critic teacher at Princeton named Sam Hunter. He'd say, "Evoke the object"... The description is always necessary, but if a critic doesn't do evaluation, he doesn't do anything.

Q: What one or two factors contributed to the decline of the once-standard evaluative criticism?

A: Two things. One is the absence of a shared body of knowledge. Critics come from multiple perspectives and have been taught that any kind of master value or master critical trope is out of bounds or even oppressive. That means there isn't a shared language, which

is problematic for critics and their readers. The second thing would be...the authority of the market. The phenomenon that you're describing began during the 1980s—and that's the great era of the rise of neoliberal politics and economics... In that context, critical evaluation is ruled out.

Q: How has art criticism informed your practice of art, criticism, or even teaching?

A: For me, art criticism and art history are mutually reinforcing, or even a dialectic. The art criticism forces me as a historian to think about the temporal. It also requires me to sharpen my language and be more direct and even conversational. The need to write from Olympian heights as a scholar for an art historical audience is made foolish if you're writing on a regular basis for an audience of normally educated people who aren't scholars. The language of art criticism has clarified my language as an art historian. On the other hand, my writing as an art historian has made me much more attuned to the historicity of a contemporary work of art.

One of the things that is lacking in contemporary criticism, it seems to me, which a historical perspective can provide, is a view of the totality. Using one's discernment, one can organize diverse materials, make valid generalizations, and draw broad conclusions. So, not only to see things in a micro-historical way, but to be able and willing to step back and look at the whole.

Q: Are there any critics or art writers, past or present, whom you especially admire and read on a regular basis?

A: I'd say Holland Cotter (of *The New York Times*) is the best critic in the United States... Luc Sante often writes well... Among past critics, I could include people from Baudelaire to Clement Greenberg, as well as Adrian Stokes, Donald Judd, Donald Kuspit, and David Craven.

Q: Which artist or exhibit has had the greatest impact on you?

A: My long-term, sustained critical and personal relationship with Sue Coe has had the greatest impact on me. She's a model of artistic diligence, of personal and political integrity, of incorruptibility, and of engagement—and sheer skill! She has a retrospective at MoMA PS1 right now.

Rebekka Federle

Artist



Q: Do you think art criticism should be more focused on evaluation or on descriptive criticism?

A: Personally, I'm more interested in descriptive criticism. I can apply what I've learned about craft theory and art history and decide for myself. I think there's more opportunity within descriptive criticism to apply your own learning to it—but then of course you're stepping away from traditional art criticism.

Q: In our judgment, evaluative criticism has generally declined in more recent times. What do you think has contributed to that decline?

A: I don't know that I'm fully licensed to speak to that. Art criticism and art have moved to a wider audience—that's why I would imagine that's happening.

Q: How has art criticism informed your practice, either as an artist or in any writing you may have done?

A: I think mainly through art criticism as it has happened within my own community—whether that be through school or through galleries or through artists I have relationships with. Art criticism at large doesn't really affect me on a day to day basis—except for Jerry Saltz, who I follow on Instagram.

Q: Are there any critics or art writers, past or present, who you admire and read on a regular basis?

A: I had readings through school but somehow, after that, that all fell by the wayside. I think that's mainly because I studied a craft field, and a lot of craft theory and craft criticism isn't too relevant to what I was doing—but I follow Jerry Saltz and his lovely wife, Roberta Smith.

Q: What artist or exhibit has had the greatest impact on you?

A: The artist that has had the greatest impact on me is somebody that didn't have any criticism written about him at the time that he was making anything—Henry Darger... I was lucky enough to have been introduced to him when I was seven. So I looked at him and his work way before any formal art training, and I think that helped me keep a certain naivete.

Michelle Grabner

Curator and the Crown Family Professor of Art at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.



Q: Do you think that art criticism should be more focused on evaluative or descriptive criticism?

A: You need both. Evaluation and interpretation need to be made, but careful description is necessary to ground your assessment.

Q: What one or two factors most contributed to the decline of the once-standard evaluative criticism?

A: Social media offers a platform for opinion to many. It is the immediacy of these opinions that erode assessments acknowledging history.

Q: How has art criticism informed your practice or not?

A: I value criticality. That includes art criticism. Recently New Formalism has been influencing my approach to critique so development of literary criticism along with history and philosophy also informing my critical and curatorial work. And obviously my studio work as well.

Q: Are there any current critics or art writers, past or present, whom you respect and read on a regular basis?

A: I have been reading Fredric Jameson again. But I have also become a fan of Rita Felski's work on critique. And then there is Caroline Levine's writing on form.

Q: What artist or exhibition has had the most impact on you?

A: The 1990 Carnegie International show had a great impact on me as a young critic and artist. I've been thinking about its subsequent impact on artmaking and theme of the international in the margins.

Dan Ramirez

Chicago-based artist. His most recent exhibition, a retrospective, “Certainty and Doubt: Paintings by Dan Ramirez,” was exhibited at the Chazen Museum of Art, Madison, WI. 2017-18



Q: Do you think that art criticism should be more focused on evaluative or descriptive criticism?

A: I find evaluative writing more significant in that it engages conceptual, philosophical and formal issues more deeply than descriptive writing. It also provides a more thorough bridge between artist and critic where transformative thought can occur between both over time. It also benefits the general art viewer in ways that descriptive writing does not.

Q: What one or two factors most contributed to the decline of the once-standard evaluative criticism?

A: Current evaluative criticism contextualizes much of its writing within a particular contemporary milieu, such as the recent focus on identity politics. This leaves little room for the larger function of interpretation that art has to offer. A decline of artists writing has also had an effect. This has fostered a lack of meaningful dialogue between artist and critic.

Q: How has art criticism informed your practice?

A: I expect art criticism to engage in a dialogue with my work that allows for some kind of transformation in my thinking. Something that pushes further on whatever I might be exploring at the time.

Q: Are there any current critics or art writers, past or present, whom you respect and read on a regular basis?

A: Yes! James Yood, Buzz Spector and Richard Schiff immediately come to mind. These are writers who have literally engaged me in the past in ways that I described earlier. I would also add Donald Judd, Richard Serra and Barnett Newman. Currently I am reading works by Korean artist Lee Ufan.

Q: What artist or exhibition has had the most impact on you?

A: Barnett Newman. His work had a huge existential impact on me. His “Stations of the Cross” challenged me as to what it means to simultaneously feel, think and look! It was a series that initially disappointed me on a first live viewing—then pushed me to grow in ways unimaginable.

Elliot Reichert

Art Editor of *Newcity* and formerly Assistant Curator at the Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University



Q: Do you think art criticism should be more focused on evaluation or descriptive criticism?

A: In written criticism, description is a necessary precursor to evaluation, providing the foundational evidence for an evaluative claim. However, description itself carries evaluative properties, as it necessitates the magnification of certain details over others within the limited scope of a critique. Thus, evaluative criticism presupposes an inherent bias on the part of the writer, despite feigning objectivity. While I practice a self-consciously evaluative approach in my criticism, I do not believe that this method is the only viable or legitimate mode of critique. Criticism must be open to possibilities that it has not already imagined, both in terms of the art it critiques and the methods it deploys.

Q: What one or two factors contributed to the decline of the once-standard evaluative criticism?

A: If evaluative criticism were ever the standard—and I’m not sure that it ever was outside of a very narrow definition of criticism—it is because art criticism as we know it was born from Enlightenment thought in a pre-photographic world. The confluence of these conditions meant that artwork had to be described in order to be grasped and that criticism was understood as a practice of knowledge production within a very specific—that is, white, male, European—epistemology. Thankfully, epistemological orientations have changed since the birth of art criticism, and so too has art. The evaluative method can no longer be effective without an expressed self-awareness of the preconditions it demands from art. And, digital photography and the internet have made description far less vital to the practice of criticism, putting pressure on critics to use description more honestly and creatively. These are positive developments.

Q: How has art criticism informed your practice of art or criticism?

A: I prefer to think that art has informed my art criticism more than any other factor. That is not to say that I do not read art criticism—I do, but only to learn about art, not to learn how to better my criticism. If the criticism is of good quality, it will recede behind the impression of the artwork it has conveyed to me. If it is

poorly written, it will impugn only itself, not the work at hand. It is as easy to write poorly about good art as it is difficult to write well about bad art.

Q: Are there any current critics or art writers, past or present, whom you admire and read on a regular basis?

A: When I am feeling numb to the art world, I hate-read Barry Schwabsky and Jerry Saltz to remind myself that I have strong opinions about art and art writing. It's like cutting yourself to make sure you still bleed. This is hardly an act of admiration, but it helps me nonetheless.

Q: What artist or exhibit has had the greatest impact on you?

A: As a critic, I depend on a steady variety of artists and exhibitions to inspire me over the years. While I have many favorite artists and appreciated exhibitions, I prefer to keep myself open to inspiration and away from overdetermining ideals. However, as a curator, I gravitate to exhibitions that exemplify the practice. The 2015 Venice Biennial, curated by Okwui Enwezor, is among my favorites.

Dmitry Samarov

Painter and writer



Photo by Boris Samarov

Q: Do you think art criticism should be more focused on evaluative or descriptive criticism?

A: I'm not sure how to answer that. It depends on the case. Also, what the venue is. I have a lot of misgivings about the whole enterprise [of criticism]... I'm not sure what the value of it is.

Artists exist without critics. Critics don't exist without artists.

Q: Have you observed a move away from evaluative to descriptive criticism?

A: There's been a movement away from writing or thinking about art, period. It has become mostly a sales job. If by "descriptive" you mean a glorified press release, well, I have no interest in that kind of writing. I think it's valuable to let a reading public know a little bit of what they'll be seeing. One of the reasons I started writing about art in Chicago was that there's just so little writing about art in Chicago.

Q: What one or two factors contributed to the decline of once-standard evaluative criticism?

A: There has to be some sort of economic dimension to changes in the art world. At some point, art critics weren't as influential on art prices as they used to be, so the art magazines stopped wielding influence. There was a day when someone like Clement Greenberg could make or break an artist. I can't think of a single art critic today who has that kind of influence. There's so many other avenues of selling art. So much of it is at auction houses. They're just commodities for ultra rich people to hide their riches.

Q: How has art criticism informed your practice of art or of criticism?

A: It's hard to track as far as the writing goes. I haven't been doing art criticism for very long, but I read all the time, so any kind of writing will have an influence. I think that I mostly write based on my individual enthusiasm about a show or an artist. As far as how the writing influences the painting, that's hard to say. I like to think I put it aside. A good percentage of the reason I do the writing is to pay bills. It's something I discovered later in life that I actually have some aptitude for and that I can actually get paid for--and that's often not the case with painting, unfortunately.

Q: Are there any critics or art writers, past or present, who you admire and read on a regular basis?

A: I've enjoyed some of Robert Hughes' writing. I like Jed Perl. I've also liked some artists' writings from the past. There's a book with Fairfield Porter's art criticism. The filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky wrote a book called *Sculpting in Time*, which I really enjoyed. The medium is not important. They're writing about the same thing. There's a great book by the filmmaker Robert Bresson called *Notes on the Cinematographer*.

Q: Are there any artists or exhibits that stand out as having had a great impact on you?

A: There was a Matisse retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. It was in the early '90s--I think when I was still in art school. That one hit me like a ton of bricks (laughs). More recently, there was a really good Raymond Pettibon show at the New Museum in New York. In Chicago, the most recent really great show I remember is Kerry James Marshall at the MCA.

Jessica Stockholder,
Artist as well as chair of the
Department of Visual Arts
(DOVA) at the University of
Chicago



Q. Do you think art criticism should be more focused on evaluation or descriptive criticism?

A: I think that art criticism should be more focused on explication. I don't really see it as a polarization that is particularly useful. I think art criticism is most useful when the critic puts himself into the shoes of the artist and tries to give language to what matters to the artists, what's driving the energy that produced the art and to then be evaluative in relationship to those observations.

Q. Evaluation, at one time, was the predominant standard for art criticism. What do you think are one or two factors that have caused its decline?

A: I think that the weight of the market eclipsing other forms of support for art has contributed to its decline because it's very difficult to bite the hand that feeds you. Also, there is an ever increasing array of different kinds of activity placed under the Art umbrella; perhaps the increasing pluralism we are privileged to live with puts stress on the form of criticism, making it difficult for short pieces of writing to bridge the gaps between us all.

Q. Are there any critics on art writing, past or present, whom you respect and read on a regular basis?

A: I don't read art criticism on a regular basis. I keep my eyes on *The New York Times* and Roberta Smith. I care about Jerry Saltz. I like the way he puts his foot in it. He's not frightened of stirring things up. Barry Schwabsky who writes for *The Nation* is a good friend of mine. I follow him.

Q. How has art criticism informed your practice as an artist or not?

A: I think it's a privilege to have people write about my work and I don't know that I can come up with something really specific about how it's informed my work but, having other people's words put to what I'm doing they often circle back sometimes raising questions and helping me understand the significance of questions that I might not have understood before. So, I value other people's thoughts about my work whether or not I agree with them.

Q. What artist or exhibit has had the most impact on you?

A: That's hard. I don't know if there is one artist or exhibition that has had the most impact. What jumps to mind is my most important teacher, Canadian artist-Mowry Baden; he had an enormous influence on me. His way of putting words to work.

Q. Let me probe that a bit more. Is there some work that has been so impactful that it may have changed your art practice?

A: I'm such a magpie in my work. I take from so many people (laughs) and I'm influenced by so many people. I mean, Peter Halley, Tauba Auerbach, Matisse, Cezanne, Robert Davidson, There isn't one. It's a plethora and I care a lot about these people.

Lori Waxman,
Freelance contributor about
contemporary art for the
Chicago Tribune, teaches art
history at the School of the
Art Institute of Chicago



Q: Do you think that art criticism should be more focused on evaluation or descriptive criticism?

A: Both. Good art criticism does both simultaneously.

Q: What one or two factors most contributed to the decline of the once-standard evaluative criticism?

A: You are presuming a decline in art criticism.

Q: How has art criticism informed your practice or not?

A: I read voraciously. I read criticism, I read novels, I read political writing, and I try to apply the best of all that I read to art.

Q: Are there any current critics or art writers, past or present, whom you respect and read on a regular basis?

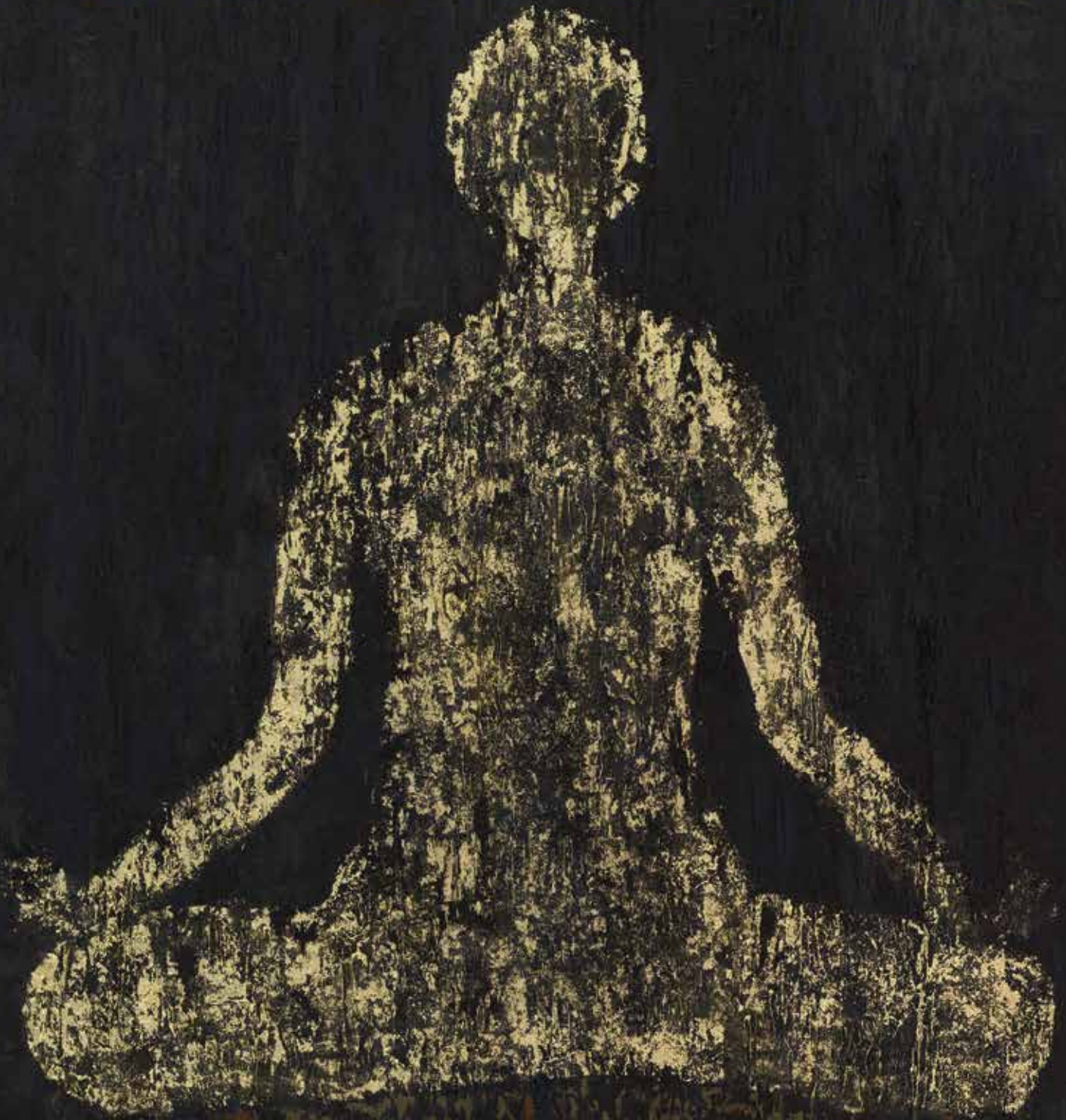
A: Sure. Coco Fusco, Peter Schjeldahl, Holland Cotter, Maggie Nelson and Carolina Miranda, among others. Oh, and Gertrude Stein!

Q: What artist or exhibition has had the most impact on you?

A: The New Contemporary exhibit at the Art Institute. Because some exhibitions are so wrong that they make you think deeply about what's really important. ■

Interviews by Tom Mullaney and Nathan Worcester.

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Golden Hour, 77x73in, 18k gold and oil on canvas, 2018

“I Was Raised on the Internet” Museum of Contemporary Art

“I Was Raised on the Internet,” a sprawling new show at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), comes close to evoking the Internet as uncurated space. In fact, the show spills over from the MCA’s physical galleries onto an accompanying website, which links to a number of games, YouTube series, and other works of art, as well as readings from a wide range of academics, venture capitalists, and, in the language of TED Talks, “thought leaders.”

Then again, “uncurated” may be too strong. To use a deliberately archaic simile from meatspace, the exhibition is more like a traditional English garden (informal, a bit weedy, and, at unpredictable moments, awe-inspiring) than a traditional French garden (formal to the point of regimented; if awe-inspiring, awe-inspiring after the fashion of an airshow or the opening ceremony of the 2008 Beijing Olympics).

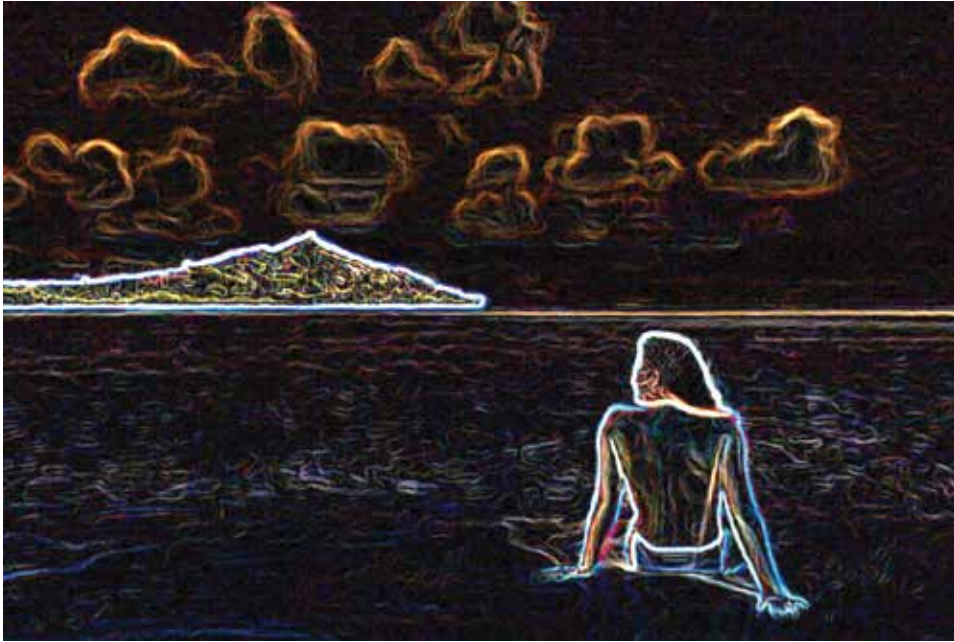
The show is loosely divided into five sections, each of which boasts a smirkingly erotic title (to be fair, this could also plausibly be rationalized as an evocation of the contemporary ‘Net’s anarchic spirit and basically adolescent climate). “Look At Me,” an exploration of identity in the age of social media and, in my judgment, the weakest section of the exhibition, foregrounds those coy little Insta-dances that so often degenerate into dopaminergic tarantism. For ideological reasons, these phenomena are evidently best handled using the Butlerian concept of “performativity” or some other postmodern ready-made.

Performativity can be a shield—that is, a means of self-defense rather than trustworthy self-revelation. See Evan Roth’s *Self-Portrait: November 1, 2017*, for example. A bunched-up vinyl print scroll of the websites Roth visited that day is billed as a self-portrait. Yet the visible portion of the scroll reveals nothing compromising. Does Roth do *anything* inappropriate or even moderately embarrassing online? Apparently not (in fairness, not all of the scroll can be seen). On the other hand, he has nothing to lose and potentially much to gain by including a Jerry Saltz tweet.

The second section of the exhibition, “Touch Me,” examines the limits and possibilities of the Internet as a medium for something like physical contact. The third section, “Control Me,” addresses state control and its ramifications for global Netizens (mind you, the Internet has reflected state control at least since the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network, or ARPANET, was developed under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Defense). “Play With Me,” the exhibition’s fourth section, is a crowd-pleaser that also gets to claim that it’s exploring the, y’know, complex theoretical ramifications of being a crowd-pleaser (maybe it has something to do with performativity). In all seriousness, who wouldn’t want to have their skull encased in a virtual reality headset to experience Jon Rafman’s *Transdimensional Serpent* as it plummets toward disorienting realism from abstract beginnings? Apparently the future, or some dimension parallel to our own, is



Angelo Plessas, *Eternal Internal Brotherhood/Sisterhood*, 2012-ongoing.
Photo by Nathan Keay, © MCA Chicago.



Constant Dullaart, *Glowing Edges_7, 10*, 2014. Lenticular print. From the series “Jennifer in Photoshop, Creative Suite 6.” Image courtesy the artist and Carroll/Fletcher.

the domain of bullheaded deities and a small army of twinkles.

Section five, “Sell Me Out,” moves from the exploration of state oversight in “Control Me” to a parallel investigation of corporate control. Only a few pieces consider how or why the two intersect. Sidenote: in a separate gallery, Simon Denny explores some of these issues pretty effectively in *Risk Crypto-Anarchist: Blockchain Conquest*, a scaled-up tabletop game that familiarizes viewers with what is at stake in the emergence of blockchain-based cryptocurrencies and related technologies.

Again, though, the exhibition’s five divisions are loose. Sophia Al-Maria’s monumental *The Litany*, a video projected onto a 2001: *A Space Odyssey*-esque monolith that looms above a heap of trampled sand, broken glass, and malfunctioning smartphones, does not gain or lose much from the curators’ conceptual framework. Al-Maria’s film brings to mind Matthew Barney and, yes, Stanley Kubrick. The shape-shifting Islamic architecture forms a convincing foundation for the piece’s overarching techno-skepticism. Ian Cheng’s *Something Thinking of You*, described as “a live simulation constantly evolving before our eyes,” is more optimistic and comparably self-sufficient. Cheng’s contribution quietly points up the generative potential of the Internet and information technology more broadly, which often seems infinite.

Although most pieces are oriented toward the future, many have unexpected parallels across art history. I must pause to observe that I am arguably doing exactly

what Angelo Plessas accuses contemporary intellectuals of doing in the exhibition’s immersive *The Eternal Internet Brotherhood/Sisterhood*: “Let’s remember that nowadays it is easy to surrender to a nostalgic past or an unattainable future. Our mind is conquered by these two mental hegemonies. **The PAST and the FUTURE are the milk and honey of contemporary intellectuals who are obsessed with re-interpreting the former and re-inventing the latter...** Consequently the PRESENT has become a happy fiction.”

On that self-critical note, I will argue that Elias Sime’s *Ants & Ceramicists: FORTHCOMING* recalls the work of Gustav Klimt. Instead of using scarce gold leaf or silver to drive up the aesthetic and material value of his paintings, Sime uses computer circuitry and an abundance of other found materials--objects that others might simply consider the detritus of industrial society. Meanwhile, the history of Western aristocratic portraiture is subtly conjured up by Constant Dullaart’s *Glowing Edges_7, 10* and *Plastic Wrap_20, 15, 15*. The two pieces come from a controversial series that uses the first image ever manipulated in Photoshop, which depicted Adobe Photoshop creator John Knoll’s wife. Knoll’s wife has become an (admittedly unwilling) version of Lorenzo de Medici or some other aristocratic subject of Renaissance painting. In somewhat the same way, the Sonoma County field depicted by Goldin+Senneby in *After Microsoft* is perhaps our closest equivalent to certain iconic religious images or battlefield scenes (the era of guerilla sniping and occasional Tomahawk missile strikes, brought to you in prime time on CNN or

at odd intervals by soldiers with access to Flickr, does not lend itself to *Leonidas at Thermopylae*; maybe real war has always been too ugly and human to warrant an epic treatment). *After Microsoft* is a 2006 recreation of *Bliss*, Charles O’Rear’s 1996 photograph of that same valley that eventually became the default background image for computers running Windows XP.

This set of reflections, like so many engendered by “I Was Raised on the Internet,” is a little too strange to be outright melancholy. On the other hand, no one would mistake it for satisfaction with the present or, worse yet, enthusiasm about the future. Is it really a surprise that most of the artists in this exhibition are Millennials? ■

Nathan Worcester

Nathan Worcester is a writer and assistant editor of the New Art Examiner. Is it really a surprise that he’s also a Millennial?

Sophia Al-Maria, *The Litany*, 2016. Sand, glass, smartphones, computer screens, tablet computers, and USB cables, with multichannel looped digital video (color and black-and-white, sound) and digital video projected vertically (color, sound). Photo by Nathan Keay, © MCA Chicago.



Jon Rafman, *Transdimensional Serpent*, 2016.

Mixed media with VR video (color, sound, 4 minutes 38 seconds).



“Parallel Lives”

Kavi Gupta Gallery

The summer collection at Kavi Gupta Gallery on West Washington Street, “Parallel Lives,” brought together thought-provoking figuration and portraiture that probed questions of identity and blurred the edges of reality. The group exhibition was thematically, if not visually, cohesive. Each artist approached the topic in their own style and media.

Among the most striking inclusions was the work in the entry hallway: Glenn Kaino’s piece shone—literally. *Bridge (Turn)* (2018) is composed of two shockingly gold disembodied arms raising a fist in front of a mirror framed by lights. The floor buckles in between the arms, creating a repetitive, hypnotic world extending far beyond the confines of the room and reality. It functions as a bridge between one world and another.



Inka Essenhigh, *Flowers in Starlight*, 2018. Enamel on canvas, 24” x 24”, 61 x 61 cm. Image courtesy Kavi Gupta Gallery.

It was impossible to ignore the large portrait of a black man hanging in the main gallery. His head leans back, and he gazes out of the canvas with a combination of weariness and disinterest. *Teddy* (2018) is rendered in acrylic with extraordinary detail by Atlanta artist Alfred Conteh. The kinks in each hair of his beard, the lines in his lips, the wrinkles in his t-shirt, and the misplacement of the clasp on his chain are each carefully rendered. Yet Conteh departs from naturalism by

painting in black and white against a vivid turquoise background. The canvas is aged with atomized bronze dust, making it rough, speckled, and stretched—a distinctly unnatural effect. Even when removed from reality, however, Teddy is alive—electric, even. It’s these contradictions between naturalism and abstraction that make the piece powerful.

On another wall, viewers are asked to consider what modesty requires. Titus Kaphar settles on removing the body all together. Imagine *Modesty* (2011) before it reached its final form, and you would see a larger-than-life oil painting of a nude woman, with long hair, standing on a rocky beach, the next in a long lineage of such paintings.

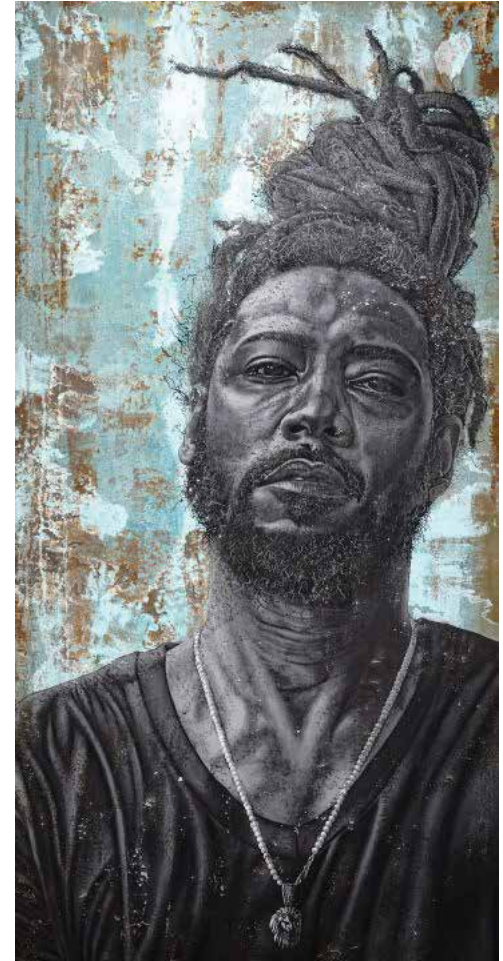
But Kaphar cut her limbs free and crumpled the canvas against her chest. Her body is an empty silhouette. It speaks to dialogues more present than ever in 2018 about the sexualization of the female form and the right to take up space. Perhaps this woman cannot exist—clothed or not—modestly enough for the public. Whatever Kaphar’s intended message, he succeeds in creating an unsettling and thought-provoking image.

The adjacent works were a fraction of the size and did not carry the same shock value but stood out nonetheless. Inka Essenhigh’s enamel on canvas works are visually and technically impressive. In *Flowers in Starlight* (2018), the artist represents language literally. White two-dimensional stars spill from the sky onto the ground among the flowers like party decorations rendered in her signature dreamy style. *New Flowers* (2018), which uses a chrome-like silver spray paint to great effect, depicts glowing buds emerging between parted stalks in a silvery bubble of safety. Both pieces mix beauty with darkness and strike ominous notes that hint that something dangerous lurks beyond the shimmer and petals.

A less-established artist contributed four noteworthy works to the installation. Basil Kincaid is known for embracing the history of his African-American family and incorporating that into his work. His quilts—a nod to the craft his family has participated in for generations—were made with his family’s discarded garments and bed sheets. Seams, buttons, and company logos create a patchwork of memories draped on the walls. It is nostalgic yet purposeful.



Titus Kaphar *Modesty*,
2011. oil on canvas,
47" x 7.5" x 96" Image
courtesy Kavi Gupta
Gallery



Alfred Conteh, *Teddy*,
2018. Acrylic and
atomized bronze dust
on canvas, 73" x 37.5"
Image courtesy Kavi
Gupta Gallery

One quilt, *Labor and Leisure* (2018), brings together his father's shirts and his parents' bed sheets in a single whole wherein employer-issued polos and satin sheets meet. In *Self-Portrait Quilt* (2017), the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles peer out between khaki pockets and plaids. The fabric of his life is captured in viscerally recognizable details that come together to create a mesmerizing whole.

Firelei Báez contributed a five-by-seven-foot oil painting that monumentalizes a forgotten thing, or perhaps the act of deciding to discard it. The subject of *Untitled Tignon Painting* is a crumpled sheet of paper with a fabric-like print. A tignon is a large piece of fabric worn as a turban-like headdress that was once required by law for Creole women in Louisiana.

A woman of color born in the Caribbean, Báez's reflection on tignons is part of a larger thematic impulse to study and celebrate women of color in her art. This particular piece captures the matter-like quality of identity: impossible to destroy, let alone forget.

This summer, Báez's work was also on exhibit at the 10th Berlin Biennale and The Studio Museum in

Harlem. Her often politically charged art is sure to make waves with Chicago audiences in September when the gallery will feature a self-titled solo show of Báez's work.

With "Parallel Lives," Kavi Gupta has brought together a truly diverse study of human and object identity and how they overlap. The gallery's commitment to the stories and art of people of color is evident, and the visual dialogue is correspondingly strong and diverse. Whether or not the prices these artists command are beyond your reach, these artists are deserving of your attention. ■

Evangeline Reid

Evangeline Reid graduated from the University of Chicago, where she studied English literature and art history. A former editor and writer for *The Chicago Maroon* and *Grey City* magazine, she has covered art and culture in Chicago since 2013.

A Tackling Embrace

Andrew Bae Gallery

Andrew Bae's River North gallery is a small but inviting space well suited for the close observation of objects. The works in the current exhibition from artist Dabin Ahn, titled "2 + 3," provoke a closer look. Ahn has created objects that function like perceptual thermometers. They gauge the degree to which what we see can be influenced and even undermined by what we are looking at.

Though some pieces are visible through the gallery windows, upon entering and ascending the small staircase, the viewer is greeted by *CMYK*. A square substrate positioned as a diamond depicts a Delftware cup resting on a surface between four flat rectangles that represent the cyan, magenta, yellow, and black, or key (CMYK), palette of commercial printing.

Stretching outward on both the left and right sides are rectangles of equal size painted on the wall. They span the gray scale, becoming lighter the further they are from the painting in the center.



Dabin Ahn, *CMYK*, 2018. Image courtesy Andrew Bae Gallery.

It is the illusion in *CMYK* that sets the tone for the rest of the work. The Delftware cup and the solid rectangles of color both have shadows cast behind them. The image becomes a playful hybrid of *trompe l'oeil* illusionism and modernist abstraction, a blending of historicized genres that continues as a thread in Ahn's work.

Four more pieces, including the visually jarring *Juxtaposed*, reference the classical academic exercise of



Dabin Ahn, *Juxtaposed*, 2017. Image courtesy Andrew Bae Gallery.

painting drapery. Ahn's abstractions appear to be composed of magnified cutouts that sometimes become solid colors where layers overlap.

Though a chronology is not apparent, this body of work represents a shift into new territory for this young artist. A current graduate student attending the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Ahn previously immersed himself in the technically driven world of observational painting. A print of a painted self-portrait is featured in this exhibition. It has been modified with overlays of transparent neon plastic, a metaphor for the artist's shift in interests and methods.

A significant part of that shift is the choice of materials. The painter includes the expected oil and acrylic on fabric while wood, plastic, brass, and have also found a place in these abstractions. It is in the works that include these materials that the traditions of painting are further poked and prodded. The works are still on the wall, but the boundary of the square or rectangle is disrupted by wooden or metallic protuberances that carry a flat image off an edge into sculptural territory.

Retina stands out as a work that, like *CMYK*, embraces the relationships between painting as an object, an idea, and an experience. This eye-shaped object is one

Continued on page 32

“Spatial Ambiguity”

Marcia Fraerman and Julie Karabenick, Hofheimer Gallery

“Abstract” is an adjective that is often loosely or incorrectly used and maligned by artists as well as the general public, which is remarkable given that abstraction is the oldest expressive style known to humans.

It’s been around since cavemen uttered their first grunts, chiseled designs onto stone tools and painted designs on cave walls with charcoal and earth mixed with animal fat.

The noun “abstract” refers to a consideration or summary of the general qualities or characteristics of something, its essence, and is by no means synonymous with the term “non-representational.” Within the doors of perception, every color, shape, sound and sensation can serve to reference something of the real world.

Hofheimer Gallery presented a sophisticated pairing of two abstract painters working within prescribed geometric vocabularies and modernist modes to suggest endless subtleties and allusions.

Viewing the exhibition, one might assume Marcia Fraerman and Julie Karabenick to be close colleagues, but this is not the case, as they were not previously acquainted.

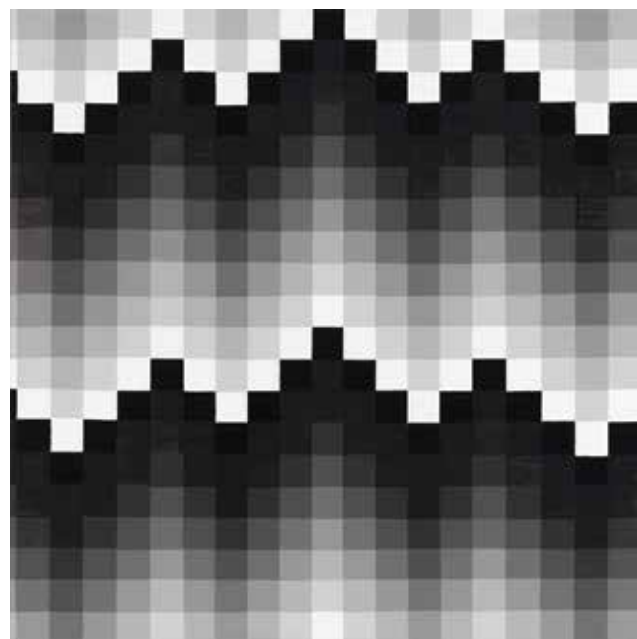
The works of both Fraerman and Karabenick imply urban rhythms and architectural environments. There are no curved lines or shapes to be found anywhere. Fraerman’s work presents spaces without any figurative elements; perhaps human presence is implied by reference to citified territories and the art of weaving. Karabenick’s works also insinuate metropolitan arenas and stage sets, but with the possible inference of dancing figures.

With the appropriation and repurposing of historical idioms of painting, some viewers might be tempted to pass this exhibition by as neo-geo rehash, but that would be a mistake. Both Fraerman and Karabenick offer a crisp, contemporary edge that’s all about nuance and modest variation.

Modernism aspired to ameliorate and transcend socially brutal excesses that were wrought by the Industrial Revolution and had culminated in the horrors of World War I. Artists sought new ways of seeing and a breaking from all previous cultural norms that had led to massive terrors.

The embrace of the universal over the personal was a major tenet of modernism and had been paramount for early abstract painters such as Wassily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich, Piet Mondrian, Joan Miró, Paul Klee and Mark Tobey.

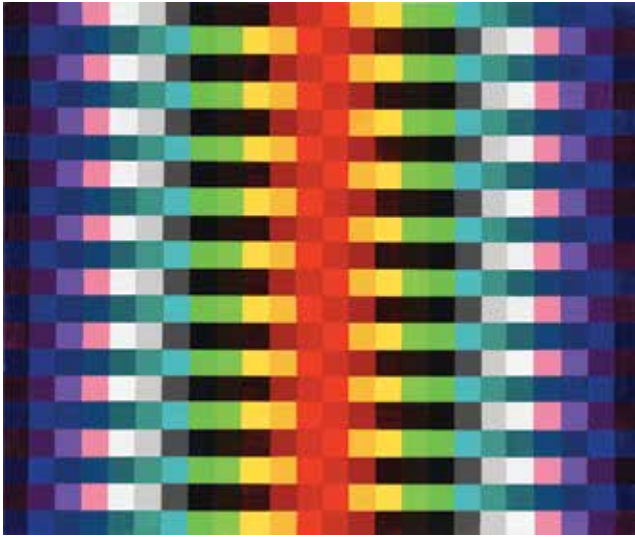
After World War II, abstract expressionism inadvertently derailed this catholic vision in a state-sponsored attempt to contrast the myth of the heroic individual, like the Marlboro Man, against the specter of communism; but the macho, hard-drinking bravado of the crew at New York’s Cedar Street Tavern was a dramatic act not tailored for the temperaments of following generations of artists.



Marcia Fraerman, *Square Inch*, 2011. Acrylic on canvas, 20" x 20." Photo courtesy Hofheimer Gallery.

While pop art sought consensus through a fascination with consumer culture and mass-marketed imagery, conceptual art’s insider elitism and postmodernism’s ensuing “anything goes” aesthetic have led us down a cultural path towards our current identity-driven sectarianism.

Today, more than a century past the birth of modernism, it can seem almost shocking and irreverent to encounter the re-emergence of universalist idealism in art. With “Spatial Ambiguity” and similar shows, we’ve



Marcia Fraerman, *Fair and Square I*, 2009. Acrylic on canvas, 20" x 20." Photo courtesy Hofheimer Gallery.

come full circle to a thoughtful, meditative and referential approach to abstract painting.

Fraerman's *Square Inch* (2011) resembles a monochromatic, double skyline of tall buildings separated by a haze of white light. The tableau is 20"x20" and consists of 400 one-inch squares ranging from white to black. The calm gray twilight and urban-generic design could just as well signify the 16th century mud towers of Shibam, Yemen as New York City.

Fraerman's *Fair and Square I* (2009) is also composed of one-inch squares but offers a full spectrum of colors. It's a horizontal rectangle with 24 vertical columns of squares and 20 horizontal rows. These interwoven rows and columns are slightly wavy and ragged, maintaining a reassuring human touch.

The design is symmetrical along a central vertical tower of warm reds. Colors transition from the middle outwards through a full spectral range, like a photographer's color bar or windows in a postmodern urban jungle.

Fair and Square II (also 2009) appears to be a larger, vertical version of *Fair and Square I*. The most striking aspect of this replication is how much the resemblance is obfuscated by a simple rotation of axis, the degree to which things change. This reminds one of a commonly expressed proposition: "Let's look at it a different way."

Square One I (2010) is a smaller version of *Square One II* (2018). Again, there are squares that conjoin to form interweaving rows and columns. The first is 20"x20" and composed of 1" squares while the latter is 40"x40" and composed of 2" squares.

Both pictures are symmetrical down the center and consist of monochromatic black, white and grays. The

left half of each appears to be raised one bar above the right half, which evokes a swaying motion. The center of each half is grayed, giving the impression of vertical veils.

It's an intriguing design wherein a little goes a long way, just as the 88 black and white keys on a piano can produce every kind of music and emotion. The pairing of similar designs demands consideration of issues of scale and uniqueness. Without dates, one might also question which came first and which is a copy.

The gallery's back wall displays a quartet of Fraerman's work from 2008: *Dark Night I, II, III and IV*. These dark and heavily textured works are variations from an earlier series that was brighter and less textured: *Green I, Red I, Yellow 1 and Blue 1*, all painted in 2003. They are like explorations of modal musical theory applied to the visual arts.

Julie Karabenick paints on square formatted, cradled panels. The painted background color of each work extends to cover the edges, which are meant to be integral components of the paintings.

Her six works in "Spatial Ambiguity" are modest in scale, ranging from 24"x24" to 29"x29". Each design floats, centered within a blue-gray or white background, and nothing extends beyond the picture plane. Shapes used are primarily triangles, trapezoids and rectangles. The overall look and feel evokes the aesthetics of the jazz era.



Julie Karabenick, #63, 2017-18. Acrylic on cradled wood panel 29" x 29." Photo courtesy Hofheimer Gallery.



Julie Karabenick, #65, 2017-18. Acrylic on cradled wood panel 29" x 29." Photo courtesy Hofheimer Gallery.

Edges are very sharp, clean and high contrast. Masking tape never gives such crisp edges; it always requires meticulous touchups. Colors of all shapes are applied in multiple layers of liquid acrylic to achieve a lush bioluminescence and uniform satin sheen. Since 2013, almost all linear elements in these works have been diagonal. The avoidance of horizontal and vertical components replaces stasis with constant motion and sets Karabenick apart from Mondrian.

The most striking feature of Karabenick's work is the thoughtful, delicate and masterful use of color that so well serves her signature-style geometric constructions. For several years now, she has been using Adobe Photoshop to design these complex psychological labyrinths and enable myriad adjustments of hues and tints.

The shapes themselves fit together into groupings that collectively form an entire composition. These sub-groups can suggest architectural space, crystal-line structures, geodesic forms and even origami. In five of the six pictures included, ample black shapes flicker from background to foreground like dancing figures or Kokopellis.

The geometric landscape of shapes in #63, 2017-18 is centered and floats upon a lush, blue-gray background. The palette is diverse and consists of complex color mixes. Thin ultramarine blue lines divide the black spaces and create compartmentalized environments. If one's eye is invited to take a walk through this scenery, it's impossible to find a destination.

Karabenick tastefully pares down the color palette a bit in #65, 2018. Here, peachy flesh tones, yellows and earth tones tumble with whispers of violet and wine reds, like kites on an overly windy day. From a distance, expanses of black, sliced by narrow burnt orange lines, merge to form a figurative mystery out of which emerge a few oases of flat white. The background on which everything hovers is a jaunty battleship gray. As in all her other works, each corner is a little different.

Tints of purples dominate #24, 2013. The four sides of this design run parallel to the cradle's edges. Corners are truncated, diagonal and intricate. The warm red line work is kept to a minimum while a surgically white background emphasizes the architectural integrity of the design. Karabenick's masterful color combinations always amaze.

"Spatial Ambiguity" is a curatorial delight that respectfully presents Fraerman's and Karabenick's works in a chance encounter and deep conversation with each other while also making a strong case for each artist as they face off across the gallery. These are paintings to contemplate and savor over time.

Though both artists accept the fact that painting does serve a decorative function by hanging on walls, they go about utilizing this function to its fullest and most intellectually engaging potential. ■

Bruce Thorn

"Spatial Ambiguity" was on view at Hofheimer Gallery, 4823 N. Damen Avenue, July 6 through July 28, 2018.

Bruce Thorn is a Chicago-based painter and musician. He has degrees in painting and drawing from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the University of Illinois at Chicago. He is a Contributing Editor with the New Art Examiner.



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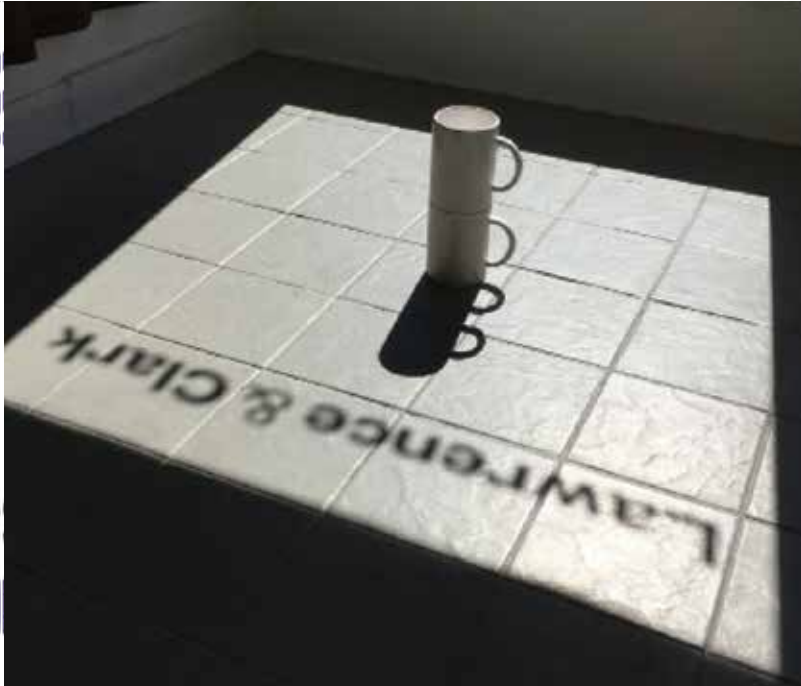
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Abramović Explains Her Art to Freud

Psychoanalyst Meets Marina Abramović by Jeannette Fischer

Psychoanalyst Meets Marina Abramović is aptly titled. The book focuses on the friendship between performance artist Marina Abramović and psychoanalyst Jeannette Fischer. Written by Fischer, the text is built around a series of conversations between the two women in 2015 exploring the relationships between art, psychoanalysis and personal history.

The introduction quotes Abramović as having said to Fischer, “From my point of view, you’re making a book for me, to clarify my soul. There’s something I’d like to understand better: Explain the links between my work and my life to me. What do I take from my personal life and transform into work, into art? I’d like greater clarity about that.”

The book succeeds in doing exactly this while also opening up both performance art and psychoanalysis to a broader audience. By weaving Abramović’s personal history through interpretations of several of her outstanding performances and a range of psychoanalytic topics, Fischer manages to illuminate all three in a straightforward, easy-to-follow, conversational mode.

The writing does not follow the typical back-and-forth interview format. Instead, Fischer creates a much more compelling dynamic. The book is organized topically by subjects such as pain, rejection, guilt, and impotence. Within these chapters, Fischer follows a format whereby she first offers a quote from Abramović, then records her response to Abramović, followed by a brief analysis of the contents of the exchange. Each of these analyses is prefaced by the phrase, “This is what Marina Abramović’s performance is about:”, followed by a summation of the proceeding analysis.

Some summation analyses include: “being trapped as someone else’s object with no hope of escape,” “nobody notices her pain,” “emptying herself to escape the void,” and “violence is the bass line of all Marina’s performances, and it is always kept silent.” This format allows for the same performances to be discussed and interpreted multiple times in relation to different pieces of Abramović’s history and differing psychoanalytic frames. The result permits us to continuously reevaluate the content, unravelling an array of potential meaning within the art and the artist’s life.

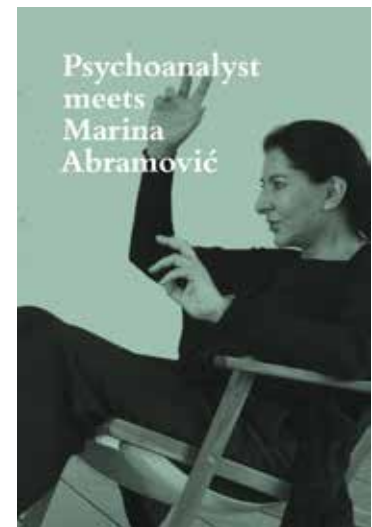
Much of Fischer’s discussion, unsurprisingly, revolves around Abramović’s relationship with her mother. Probing the lifelong dynamics between the artist and her mother, Fischer explains a kind of abnegation which forms the foundations of both Abramović’s work as well as her romantic partnerships. Fischer describes a process through which the artist must deny her autonomy in order to make her mother satisfied.

This process repeats itself in Abramović’s capacity to endure pain in order to serve the needs of those around her. In her art, the process manifests as performances in which the audience is given permission to do anything they wish to the artist—including the act of ending her life, while she takes on full responsibility for their actions.

In her personal relationships, this manifests as giving all her energy to her partners without taking care to fulfill her own needs. She has taken the process of giving up her self to its extreme. Fischer writes, “The re-enactment of her exploitative relationships, the repetition of the need to fill and feed other people, hints that the same processes were at work during her childhood and youth. By this we mean the pain re-enacted in her performances, for it hurts to dissolve oneself for someone else’s benefit.”

I found the discussion around pain particularly relatable. Early in the book, Abramović is quoted as saying that “pain is a door” which, if opened, allows one access to a “different state.” This way of understanding the process of pain sounds very similar to the emotional recovery one aims for through psychoanalysis. Fischer writes about how the pains of our childhoods create our patterns of behavior in adult life.

Defense mechanisms formed in childhood, which become routine in our relationships with spouses



and friends, or ritualistic behaviors which allow us to process traumas, remain ever-present in our lives, informing our future relationships.

The book's text avoids needless jargon and lays open a dialogue in which any reader who has experienced pain in a personal relationship can relate to the grieving and long-lasting emotional ripples that emanate from such experiences. The re-enacting of pain, in either a performance or in psychoanalytic therapy, can be understood as the process of walking through pain's door to find emotional growth on the other side.

The book, while small both as an object and in length (with photographs of Abramović's performances), allows for an intimate and accessible reading experience. The content doesn't suffer from feeling overly dense or rhetorical as some highly analytical art books can be. Instead, it offers insight for anyone interested in understanding performance art or psychoanalysis better.

I found myself evaluating my own personal relationships through each chapter's framing and felt that

the book was particularly successful in making the mechanisms of Abramović's performances relatable to common complications in human intimacy. *Psychoanalyst Meets Marina Abramović* is a quick, enlightening read that I'd recommend to anyone interested in this artist, performance art, psychoanalysis, or their interrelation. The book's strength is that there is no singular takeaway but rather a multifaceted exploration which may even teach readers something about themselves. ■

Shanna Zentner

Book is published by Scheidegger & Spiess, 2018, 160 p., 8 color plates, 14 halftones, 4.5" x 6", ISBN-13: 978-3-85881-794-5, cloth, \$20. Distributed by the University of Chicago Press.

Shanna Zentner is a Post-MFA teaching fellow in the Department of Visual Arts (DOVA) at the University of Chicago. This is her third appearance in these pages.

A Tackling Embrace

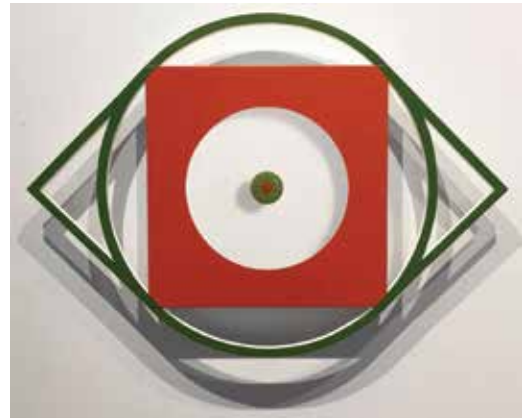
Continued from page 26

of the more sculptural pieces and feels like an inside joke that can't easily be put into words. The humor is in the perpetual feedback loop that is the eye and the image. The "retina" in *Retina* is a square, a reference to the images' standard four-sided format.

Gallerist Andrew Bae says, "Beauty, to me, is harmony," in his wall text for this exhibition. The "to me" is a subtle reminder that beauty is subjective and that there's more to be garnered from this work. Taking beauty out of the equation, we are presented with an artist whose process develops along a dialogue with historical modes to reveal a creative logic.

Bae mentions Caravaggio as a point of reference to Ahn's earlier work. It is clear that the artist has leapt from the realm of the classical to the modern, but the works in "2 + 3" are mired in the aesthetics of 1980's abstraction and graphic design. *CMYK* not only serves as rubric for the perceptual experience that may reoccur in this exhibition but also dates the aesthetic modality to the age of print.

The *CMYK* color printing technique is obviously still a part of our lives, but we live in the age of *RGB*



Dabin Ahn, *Retina*, 2018. Image courtesy Bae Gallery.

color-filled screens that permeate our everyday experience and shape much our visual world. Nevertheless, the foray of Ahn's muted and primary palette into modernist abstraction and op art is a logical next step for this skilled artist in exploring new territory. Perhaps we will see more familiar aspects of our contemporary aesthetic moment in the next phase of his exploration. ■

Evan Carter

Evan Carter is a contributing editor of the *New Art Examiner*. He earned his MFA degree in 2017 from the University of Chicago and wrote about Documenta 14 in a prior issue of the *Examiner*.

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