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Feature Damon Willick

Criticism After Art: Comments on the “Crisis” of Art Criticism (or, How Writing About Art Writing Earns Its Bad Name Again and Again)

Contemporary art criticism is absurd not only because of its rhetoric, its language, and its solecisms of logic. It is also absurd because of its repetitiousness.

-Clement Greenberg¹

Polemics on art criticism are as cyclical and predictable as local television weather reports. The déjà vu of such weather reporting, whether it's the ordinary heat waves of summer or the yearly storm watches of winter, has always relied on a certain eschatological mentality in which the next storm is more extreme and pressing than the previous season's. In such states of mind, every dark cloud contains the torrential downpour, every heat wave the next catastrophic drought. In most writings on the state of art criticism, there is a similar critical amnesia that takes place. The same basic arguments get repeated and packaged in unique, but familiar ways. Writers usually fall into binary oppositions: one side of the debate decries the absence of aesthetic standards, mourning the loss of formalist criticism à la Clement Greenberg, while the other side

derides formalism's subjectivity and elitism while defending itself against accusations of academicism and political correctness.

Christopher Bedford, in his essay "Art without Criticism" which appeared in the previous issue of *X-TRA*, calls for, in part, a return to a Greenbergian model of art criticism in order to restore a level of criticality essential for future art history. Bedford locates the lack of aesthetic judgment in current criticism as the result of the art historical training of most critics writing today.² Critics should evaluate works of art, not historicize and contextualize, he argues, and one only needs to look back to the model of Clement Greenberg to find a solution to what he characterizes as our current dilemma. Bedford writes, "If we are to recapture the spirit (if not the terms) of Greenbergian criticism, critics must start thinking and working as critics again, even if they have been trained not to."³

Bedford's argument echoes similar critiques of contemporary art criticism written recently by such writers as Michael Duncan, Raphael Rubinstein, and Jerry Salz.⁴ Significantly, these writers reiterate arguments set forth by such figures as Hilton Kramer and Harold Bloom, who in the 1980s tried in vain to counter what they saw as the entrenched "relativism" of postmodernism. As Bloom explained of the seriousness of the situation some fifteen years prior to our current crisis, "Things have fallen apart, the center has not held, and mere anarchy is in the process of being unleashed upon what used to be called 'the learned world.'"⁵ Around the same time, Kramer founded the journal *The New Criterion* to save art criticism from the "fateful collapse of critical standards" which resulted from "the repulsive features of the radical movements of the Sixties."⁶ Central to all of their arguments is a vigorous belief in aesthetic judgment and a goal to rescue Enlightenment values and modernist ideals from the onslaught of post-modern and post-structural theory. The defenders of the lost art of art criticism all

adhere to notions of beauty, taste, and the universality of aesthetic judgment.

Greenberg is the model critic for many of those decrying the current state of art criticism. Today's discontents have idealized Greenberg and critics of his era as the antithesis of the noncommittal, jargon-laden art historians/critics they believe have guided art criticism to its current state. Yet, even at the height of Greenberg's influence, a supposed *belle époque* for art criticism, Greenberg perceived there to be an inherent crisis in the practice. In an essay entitled "How Art Writing Earns Its Bad Name," Greenberg attacked what he believed to be the uninformed and poetic nature of most art criticism of his time. In particular, he focused his attack on Harold Rosenberg's "The American Action Painters" for its lack of art historical grounding and reliance on existential philosophy. Claiming that "[Jackson] Pollock told me, very sheepishly, that some of the main ideas of the 'action painting' article came from a half-drunken conversation he had with Mr. Rosenberg on a trip between East Hampton and New York,"⁷ and that all of the Abstract Expressionists took Rosenberg's essay as "a malicious representation of both their work and their ideas."⁸ Greenberg's main point was that without art historical context and reference, abstract painting became some "freakish, new-fangled way of applying paint to canvas... or non art."⁹ For Greenberg, the art critic should be able to relate contemporary art with the past masterpieces of modern art. The art critic needed to be an art historian, in a way, able to support his or her judgment with historical reference and precedence. As he explained, "Pollock's art turns out at the same time to rely far less on the accidental than had been thought. It turns out in fact, to have an almost completely Cubist basis, and to be the fruit of much learning and much discipline...It was the first look of the new American painting, and only the first look, that led Harold Rosenberg to take

it for a mystification beyond art on to which he could safely graft another mystification.”¹⁰

What can we make of art criticism if it has seemingly been in crisis for at least the last fifty years? What does it mean that even the paragon of modernist criticism, Clement Greenberg, bemoaned the state of the practice at the height of his influence? Might it be that modernist art criticism, the act of objectifying one's subjective insight and judgment, has always been a flawed practice? It was only during the Enlightenment period that aesthetic truth became the domain of a trained, objective, disinterested eye. Aesthetic beauty became the product of a special domain of our minds, a universal cognitive function (aesthetics) attainable to those with the ability to truly see. With this skill of seeing came the modern art critic whose role became translating the visible beauty of certain objects of art into legible and influential language that, at its best, would influence public thought and practice. Since the mid-nineteenth century, a succession of English speaking critics have carried the torch of judging aesthetic value and beauty (i.e. John Ruskin, Roger Fry, Clive Bell, and Clement Greenberg, to name a few of the most prominent). Their judgments were moral in character and tone, making the case that good art mattered in society and could counter the general malaise and decline of mainstream Western culture. Such aesthetic judgments implored their readers to truly see and spend time with art. If you did not see as they did, one had to look again, only this time purely and disinterestedly.

To return to an imagined Greenbergian state today, one which is uninfluenced by art history, is naive, if not impossible. Even in times of crisis, a return to an antiquated model is not the answer, especially if that model is idealized and simplified. To ignore the legacies (and lessons) of postmodernism, poststructuralism, feminism, multiculturalism, globalism, etc., and go back to a

Greenbergian model of criticism when writing about contemporary art that accounts for these social, political, and theoretical movements of our day, will not resolve the “crisis” of art writing today. The world we live in, and the art that contemporary critics write about, is multiple and confused, as it has always been. What is unique about our era and our art is that this multiplicity is now acknowledged and embraced and often becomes the topic of today’s best art. To intimate that spending more time looking at the art will lead to aesthetic truth ignores how such looking is historically conditioned. As Katy Siegel, a common target in the debates on the current state of art criticism, writes, “The world is too big, there are too many artists and too many interests for us to believe in a single progressive mainstream whose identity we can debate.”¹¹ As such, there is no crisis in art criticism, just ebb and flow of the power afforded the practice. As today’s art market resurges and wields its power, art criticism seems less and less consequential. Siegel explains, “We have lost the power that critics briefly held in the modernist art world—the legacy of which is still with us in the fantasy that criticism can save Western society, or at least painting. Neither is true, but there are useful things we can do, and it’s hard enough to do those things well.”¹² Or as Arthur Danto, another favorite punching bag for those claiming crisis, defended of his practice, “[a]s an art critic, I am not an art teacher doing studio crits pointing out strengths and weakness, prodding them to become better artists...my task is to give my readers something to think about—about art, about life, and the relationships between them.”¹³ Like the best of the art they discuss, what Siegel and Danto offer is a historically informed (and not academically insular) type of art criticism that encourages the critical thinking and participation of their readers.

The time has come to move beyond reiterating ourselves in debates that have taken place for at least the last half-century. The current writing on the state of art criticism is not so current and does little

to move beyond simplified binary oppositions. Just as with the current state of art, which can be characterized as multiple, complicated, and contested, so too is the writing about such art. If there is a crisis of criticism, then there is a crisis of art. I am of the opinion that there is a crisis of neither, and that we will all be okay.

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Footnotes

1. Clement Greenberg, "How Art Writing Earns Its Bad Name," in John O'Brian, ed., *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 4, *Modernism with a Vengeance* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 143. ↵
2. What has largely fueled the recent focus on the lack of criticism in art criticism is the 2002 Columbia University's National Arts Journalism Program report in which 91% of the 169 art critics surveyed listed their main role to be educating their readers, while 75% listed expressing a personal judgment to be the least important aspect of their writing. See *The Visual Art Critic: A Survey of Art Critics at General-Interest Publications in America* (New York: National Arts Journalism Program, Columbia University, 2002). ↵
3. Christopher Bedford, "Art Without Criticism," *X-TRA*, vol. 10, no. 2 (Winter 2007), p.7. ↵
4. For a good overview of the current debates within art criticism, see Raphael Rubinstein, ed. *Critical Mess: Art Critics on the State of their Practice* (Lenox, MA: Hard Press Editions, 2006). ↵
5. Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994), p. 1. ↵
6. The Editors, "A Note on *The New Criterion*," *The New Criterion*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Sept. 1982), p. 2. ↵
7. Greenberg, "How Art Writing Earns Its Bad Name," p. 138. ↵
8. *Ibid.* ↵
9. *Ibid.*, p. 139. ↵
10. *Ibid.*, p. 141. ↵
11. Katy Siegel, "Everyone's a Critic," in Raphael Rubinstein, ed., *Critical Mess: Art Critics on the State of their Practice* (Lenox, MA: Hard Press Editions, 2006), p. 48. ↵
12. *Ibid.*, p. 47. ↵
13. Arthur C. Danto, "The Fly in the Fly Bottle: The Explanation and Critical Judgment of Works of Art," in Raphael Rubinstein, ed. *Critical Mess: Art Critics on the State of their Practice* (Lenox, MA: Hard Press Editions, 2006), p. 73. ↵