

How Conservative Ideology Stunted the Wall Street Journal's Art Coverage

by [Ben Davis](#)

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"Critics all over the world are using the News of the World scandal as an opportunity to do what should have been done years ago," Rolling Stone's avenging angel Matt Taibbi [writes](#), "which is indict Rupert Murdoch in the court of public opinion." Thus, [in the New York Times](#), business-correspondent-turned-Op-Ed-columnist Joe Nocera takes the occasion to assert that Murdoch's ownership of the Wall Street Journal — which has published an [already infamous editorial defense](#) of Murdoch — has made the paper both more ideological and led to "sometimes surprisingly unsophisticated coverage of business." (The WSJ newsroom disagrees, [according to WWD](#), though the fact that Dow Jones's CEO had to quit because of his connection to Murdoch's U.K. operations did prompt the humble reflection that "the slime gets on all of us.")

Well, as long as we are assessing how ideology has led Murdoch's properties astray, I thought, why not have a little fun and ask: What's the deal with the art section at the Wall Street Journal? From where I sit, I'm unable to judge whether Murdoch's ownership has

particularly degraded the Journal's art criticism since he purchased the paper in 2007; it was pretty kooky when it was owned by the Bancrofts. But that is the paper that Murdoch apparently wanted to own — and almost certainly the reason that the Journal's art coverage lags can be traced back to ideology.

To be fair, the WSJ has great reporting on the contemporary art market, courtesy Kelly Crow and others. On the other hand, the review coverage.... Well, have you ever, once, heard someone refer to the "Wall Street Journal Review" the way they refer to the "New York Times Review"? The Times has a deep bench of must-read, dynamic writers — Roberta Smith, Holland Cotter, Michael Kimmelman, and others — who can speak both articulately and accurately about a broad range of art, as well as set the agenda with bigger picture articles. Meanwhile, the arts features in the Journal are almost inexplicably faulty.

Take [a recent dispatch](#) from WSJ Leisure & Arts editor Eric Gibson, an April feature portentiously titled "Metamorphosis of the Ordinary." This lengthy essay — almost 1,000 words! — is bizarrely devoted entirely to a single Picasso sculpture featured in a traveling show at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts: "Bull's Head" (1942). Why on earth dedicate this huge slab of text to this admittedly great, but exceedingly well-known, work of art? What's the hook? Ah, then you find it: Picasso's "Bulls Head," Gibson tells us, stands as a riposte to the "clown prince of modern art" [Marcel Duchamp](#), who posed a "sweeping threat" to "the idea of the artist as shaman." So, there it is: the real point is to draft Picasso into service of the righteous crusade against contemporary "anti-art."

This is an old song for Gibson. Waaaay back in 2006, he drew some fleeting attention to the WSJ's art page with [a think piece](#) called "The Lost Art of Writing About Art," denouncing the obscure wall texts at the Whitney Biennial of that year. Well, this was actually not that hard to do: [I took a swipe at these wall texts myself](#). For Gibson, however, the exercise was really an excuse for a lengthy diatribe about the evils of all conceptual art. If you read really carefully, you might recognize some familiar themes here: "It was [Marcel Duchamp](#) who unwittingly launched art criticism on its current path of willful obscurantism." ("Feminism and Marxism" play supporting roles as corrupting influences.)

Gibson [sometimes contributes](#) to the New Criterion, the tendentiously conservative aesthetic journal founded by Hilton Kramer as an outlet for the right's classier efflorescences in the culture wars. And his ideological framework is, to all appearances, classic New Criterion-ism, flying the flag of a patrician classicism and denouncing the

foibles of contemporary art as an example of the corrupting influence of permissive liberal values.

Perhaps this explains why the WSJ's culture features sometimes read as if they were penned by Andy Rooney. Consider Eric Felten's [recent essay](#) that bears the marvelously Rooney-esque title "Simpsons Syndrome: Overused Cultural Icons Trigger a Gag Reflex." Starting from [some awful new public art in Chicago](#), it degenerates into a rant that really has to be read to be appreciated about college students sporting "the hackneyed hirsute image of Che Guevara." Kids today with their Che Guevara T-shirts!

Holding down the position of the Journal's key voice on contemporary art these days is Lance Esplund, a veteran of the New York Sun, the unlamented right-wing paper which made a backward-looking take on art a major part of its brand identity. Remember last year, when [Esplund suggested](#) that the world would be better off if John Baldessari, after famously burning all his art in 1970 as a skin-shedding gesture, had simply "stopped there"? As if this wasn't an all-consuming enough verdict, Esplund also announced that Baldessari's case "of course raises the question of conceptual art and conceptual artists in general: Why do they bother?" More recently, in [a dismissive review](#) of the well-liked Ryan Trecartin show at MoMA PS1 ("merely intensified more-of-the-same"), Esplund makes it clear up front that he considers video art in general to be basically a fraud.

You have to at least try to connect with the art of the present if you want people making art in the present to care about what you are saying. Taken as a whole package, the WSJ gives off the impression of being a paper that understands why people might buy contemporary art — just not why people might like it. To be sure, some artists get away with some pretty outrageous things today, which is why cranky blanket denunciations of the Esplund type can sound vaguely like truth-telling. But crypto-culture-wars style criticism whose underlying moral, relentlessly repeated, is that 'everything after Duchamp is a pile of crap' — the classic conservative wish that things had simply 'stopped there' in a bygone golden age — has severe limits as a vision of cultural coverage. At the very least, it's predictable. I would actually prefer more pieces like the knowingly philistine "[How Cy Twombly Is Like the Zynga IPO](#)" from the Journal's Mean Street blog, classily issued to mark the painter's recent death. At least that's kind of novel.

Of all of the outrages within Rupert Murdoch's far-flung empire, letting the Wall Street Journal's art pages slide into irrelevance because it chimes with a sort of conservative worldview is probably a relatively minor one. But, you know, it is still one of them.

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