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Surviving the Crisis

by Ben Davis

Is there anything new to be said about the “crisis of art criticism?” A sense of malaise and discontent has become so endemic to the field that it seems to have become unavoidable background noise, a kind of intellectual tinnitus. Already five years ago, British critic Adrian Searle had this to say:

At almost every international art fair over the past few years, there has been a panel discussion about the crisis in art criticism. I have found myself talking about the topic in London, Madrid, Berlin and Miami. Wherever critics are paid to gather... they go on about the crisis.¹

Like Searle, I feel like I am called upon to address the “crisis” almost everywhere I go. Yet, despite my “crisis fatigue,” a panel I was on recently about the subject at the College Art Association in New York fired my imagination. Here is the description of the topic we were given:

Print outlets for art criticism continue to diminish in number and digital venues, usually non-paying, increase. The sheer mass of art industry product has made the old-style thumbs-up-thumbs-down gallery review less and less relevant. Global consciousness demands critics be familiar with ever greater ranges of cultures, though that demand is often not met. A standoff between so-called academic and popular criticism continues. Much art criticism still seems unable to expand beyond consumer-advocacy to some larger talk about art, society and politics, which would include a critical appraisal of the art world. These are some of the issues to be raised about what is viewed by some as a moribund discipline.

Perhaps counter-intuitively, what inspires me about this way of introducing the problem is its very incoherence. It occurred to me in read-

ing it that what is called the “crisis” is actually multiple *crises*; the malaise art critics face may stem from the fact that distinct issues, which would imply very different types of solutions, are being run together.

Let us, then, proceed to disaggregate these issues, inspecting each in turn. We’ll start with this: “Print outlets for art criticism continue to diminish in number and digital venues, usually non-paying, increase.”

This fact is undeniable. “We are past the tipping point,” András Szántó wrote in *The Art Newspaper* in 2009, “it has become acceptable to run a paper with just a skeletal culture staff.”² As for the other bastion of critical thought, academia, universities have in recent years turned massively towards the use of adjunct teaching faculty, dramatically increasing the precarity of life for academic art historians.³

These are serious challenges. However, *neither* is actually art-specific. Writers in general face a crisis. The number of people employed by newsrooms as a whole is lower now than it was in 1978.⁴ Similarly, the turn towards adjunct labour cuts across the academic environment: “non-tenure track positions now account for 68 percent of all faculty appointments in American higher education.”⁵

Let us turn, then, to the second “crisis” mentioned in our panel description: “Global consciousness demands critics be familiar with ever greater ranges of cultures, though that demand is often not met.” While there is no doubt that the art world is more global than it ever has been, the degree to which this is a “crisis” can be overstated, or at least misunderstood.

A little while ago, on still another panel

where the “crisis” came up, a fellow critic identified globalized pluralism as the culprit, using Chinese artist Cai Guo-Qiang’s 2008 show at the Guggenheim as an example of a radically inexplicable new form of art. Well, as with any artist, you must do your homework in order to get Cai’s art. But Cai Guo-Qiang lived for many years in New York, maintained a studio there, and was known abroad long before he was embraced in his homeland of China.

As evidence that critics were having difficulty grappling with pluralism, the same critic mentioned Peter Schjeldahl’s *New Yorker* review of the Guggenheim show. But what Schjeldahl actually wrote was, “Talking with Cai... gave me a feeling that I’ve got used to in international art circles lately: that of being provincial, of blinking in the face of an intricate sophistication that is grounded elsewhere.” He then compares him to Olafur Eliasson, Rirkrit Tiravanija and Christo. “Such artists,” Schjeldahl wrote, “belong less to an art world than to a travelling art circus, with no coherent audience and thus scant purchase for critical discussion.”⁶

We are dealing here not with the challenge of “pluralism” but with a kind of a new cosmopolitan international style. To blame pluralism for a sense of crisis seems, then, to me to be a mystification, a dodge. At any rate, I don’t really see why an awareness of new art from different regions of the globe would represent a crisis rather than a really great opportunity for a renewed role for art criticism as ambassador for new and interesting phenomena. There must be some additional piece on top of pluralism that transforms it into crisis.

Which brings us, at last, to the third and discrete “crisis” from our panel description: “Much art criticism still seems unable to expand beyond consumer-advocacy to some larger talk about art, society and politics, which would include a critical appraisal of the art world.”

Here, at last, I think we are in the realm of a “crisis of criticism” proper: there is a sense that contemporary art criticism is simply *not relevant*, or doesn’t feel so.

Before we tackle this head on, however, let me add that this issue of relevance has to be further untangled from another issue, which is that of the market, since the “crisis of criticism” often gets rolled up with the issue of whether or not today’s art critics have any influence on the art market.

Money certainly dominates the centre of the discussion as never before, because the rich are richer than ever before. And yet I think the complaint that art criticism is in “crisis” because critics can’t stop bad art from selling is baffling. Art fairs are often deemed the heart of darkness, obliterating criticism beneath a tide of commerce: “[A]lmost everyone says in private how they hate fairs,” Holland Cotter wrote, addressing the inaugural Frieze New York in 2012, “but everyone shows up at them, smiling anyway, and hangs out, when they could be visiting studios, or going to offbeat spaces, or taking trips, to [places] where all kinds of serious, in-touch-with-life work is going on.”⁷ The point is well taken: obsessing about criticism’s lack of hold on the market reduces the value of art writing to the very commercial dimension that supposedly is being lamented.

If the problem is not the market, what, then, is the real issue? Art writing feels most relevant when people who matter—and ultimately that’s artists and maybe curators—*care* about what is being written, when it affects the practice of art. Critic Irving Sandler, writing recently for yet another take on the “crisis of criticism” in the cultural journal *The Brooklyn Rail*, is clear that pluralism becomes a “crisis” when it undercuts critics’ ability to engage in prescriptive criticism. “What sharpened the debates [in the past],” he writes, “were markedly different art-critical approaches: for example, Clement Greenberg’s formalism versus Harold Rosenberg’s existentialism, or Michael Fried’s defense of Color Field abstraction versus Robert Morris’ or Robert Smithson’s advocacy of Minimalism.”⁸

Play a game: next time you are reading serious contemporary academic-inflected criticism about art, see how many times you read these ritualistic takedowns of the half-century-old ideology of Greenbergian formalism. What explains the fascination with Clement Greenberg, who has been so widely discredited you’d think he could simply be laid aside in all but historical context? As I see it, the answer is very simple: Greenberg produced critical ideas that *mattered greatly* to artists and seemed to inform art-making. The sense of fullness that that provided is the benchmark of success for critical writing, and lacking a present-day alternative, contemporary critics return to it as a reference, even if it is a negative one.

In this way, the “crisis of criticism” reminds me of what Nietzsche said about nihilism: you only experience the lack of God as a crushing weight if you believed in God in the first place, and you’re stuck between belief and doubt. I

think that’s basically where a lot of the critical malaise lies: it’s a case of having experienced the great relevance that old theories had but not being able to escape their orbit. As Whitney Kimball noted when summarizing the debate about criticism in *Art F City*, by and large, the critics involved avoid actually engaging with any art writing done after 1980; the entire conversation replicated the irrelevance that it was decrying.⁹

If I were really a full-blooded contemporary Nietzschean, the solution to this situation would be to just enjoy the lack of One True Position, and to celebrate the crazy novelty of everything. But it seems to me that the opposition between prescriptive criticism and untethered pluralism is itself false, and it is accepting the terms of this implicit binary that leads to the sense of being stuck in a “crisis.” One can, in fact, advocate for art *and* make meaningful critical intervention into artistic practice without reverting to Greenberg-style dogma.

To put things very schematically, the method I advocate adopting if we are to break out of this deadlock includes three moments of critical reflection:

- 1 As a complex social practice, art is embedded in a variety of other discourses: politics, science, technology, economics, etc. This is part of what gives it its vitality, and the claims that art makes about these spheres, or that are made for art in relationship to these spheres, can be evaluated for their veracity. You can make quite strong claims about whether the political discourse in which a work engages is sound or not, whether the claims to technological novelty it makes are plausible or implausible, and so on.
- 2 Aesthetic experience, however, is not reducible to the claims made for it in any of these other spheres. The subjective dimension is vital when it comes to art. It is possible, for instance, to agree with a work politically, and find it boring as a work of art; or, in another instance, to argue that an artist misunderstands basic technological concepts but is still interesting; etc.
- 3 Consequently, the practice of art criticism acquires a dual role: ensuring that art maintains a vital relationship with the contemporary world *and* disentangling the factual claims made for and about it from the subjective experience of the work as art. Criticism contains both prescription and pluralism together, in disjunctive synthesis.

I’m not optimistic that writers can, by themselves, stop the Internet from undermining the business model of print journalism or reverse globalization. But they *can* find a way to move beyond the dead end of the “crisis” debate and be more relevant. Society finds ways to support the things that people actually believe in—but if art criticism wants to be one of those things, it must be equipped to make a case for itself. In this sense, finally, the keys to overcoming all the different “crises” of criticism may be connected after all. ×

“Art writing feels most relevant when people who matter—and ultimately that’s artists and maybe curators—care about what is being written, when it affects the practice of art.”

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Endnotes

- 1 Adrian Searle, “Critical Condition,” *The Guardian*, March 18, 2008; <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artand-design/2008/mar/18/art>
- 2 András Szántó, “With newspapers in terminal decline, what future for arts journalism?” *The Art Newspaper*, April 29, 2009; <http://www.theartnewspaper.com/articles/With-newspapers-terminal-decline-future-journalism?17214>
- 3 Claire Goldstene, “The Politics of Contingent Academic Labor,” National Education Association, October 22, 2012; <http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/HE/2012-TA-Goldstene.pdf>

- 4 *The State of the News Media 2013: An Annual Report on American Journalism*, Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism, March 18, 2013; <http://stateofthemedial.org/>
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- 6 Peter Schjeldahl, “Gunpowder Plots,” *The New Yorker*, February 25, 2008; http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/artworld/2008/02/25/080225craw_artworld_schjeldahl

- 7 Holland Cotter, “On an Island, Worker Bees Fill a Long White Hive,” *The New York Times*, May 4, 2012; <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/05/arts/design/frieze-new-york-contemporary-art-fair.html>
- 8 Irving Sandler, “Art Criticism Today,” *The Brooklyn Rail*, December 2012–January 2013; <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2012/12/editorsmessage/art-criticism-today>
- 9 Whitney Kimball, “Critics Respond to a Call-to-Arms, Here’s What You Need to Know,” *Art F City*, January 17, 2013; <http://www.artfacity.com/2013/01/17/critics-respond-to-a-call-to-arms-heres-what-you-need-to-know/>