Art Writing Online

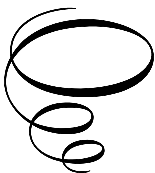
Art Writing Online:

The State of the Art World

By

David Carrier

Cambridge Scholars Publishing



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This book is for Barry Schwabsky

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INTRODUCTION: WHY ART CRITICISM MATTERS

Why do we value art criticism? What intellectual or practical purpose does it serve? And what goal is served by this collection of my recent criticism? This Introduction will answer these questions.

My reviews focus on noteworthy individual exhibitions and books, but in order to fully understand individual artworks and books, a larger perspective is required. In the art world system, the art, the gallery and museum displays, and critical commentary all play a role. For that reason, this selection of my reviews is supplemented by accounts that analyze this system and discuss the recent dramatic, disruptive effects of the coronavirus. Often, indeed, I describe the exhibition setting, for how we judge art is influenced by its context. A great installation can make good art look more convincing, while a poor display can undercut its strengths. And because I cover a wide variety of exhibitions, I hope that this selection of my writings in one book will encourage instructive comparisons.

Any record of this art world system is radically incomplete. There are more exhibitions worth seeing, and more books worth reading, than can possibly be reviewed. Inspired by Franco Moretti's studies of literature, which argue that theorists should study a great variety of examples and not just a few canonical works, I once envisioned an imaginary journal that would briefly review every show in New York, thus offering a total picture of art world activity. And so I was excited when I wrote about Loren Munk, whose art provides a partial but still very ambitious realization of this way of thinking. In fact, however, there is more interesting art on display than almost anyone, except possibly Jerry Saltz, could hope to see, and more worthwhile books published than anyone, except maybe James Elkins, could read. The

richness of the New York-centered display system never fails to astonish me. And while it's understandable that reviewers focus on the grandest gallery and museum exhibits, often I have learned the most from the smaller institutions and marginal galleries.

Although I've been publishing art criticism for forty years, I've only in the past few years discovered how to do it properly, at least to my own satisfaction. Perhaps that's because a great deal of practice is needed, but also because in recent years my writing has benefited greatly from superlative editing. In sharp contrast to print journals, the immediacy of the internet makes it possible to go over reviews in detail and get them online while the show is still up. Generous editors have corrected my errors, egged me on and also sometimes persuaded me not to make a fool of myself. Because I've learned to have complete faith in their judgment, my writing has become more adventuresome. I trust these editors and they trust me: successful writing requires mutual trust.

While some editors may try to pressure you into presenting their own viewpoint, the best ones give you the freedom to become yourself. Just as a trapeze performer needs to have total confidence that his partner will reach out to catch him as he flies through the air, we need our editors to have our backs. Nowadays the editing of academic writing is usually relatively minimal. But we art critics (if we're lucky) are able to have labor-intensive support. Organizing and financing an art journal is extremely difficult, and for that reason, among many others, I am extremely thankful for the editors who have made my intellectual life possible. And I am fully aware that the art world on which I report exists only thanks to the labors of innumerable curators, gallerists, and other people who work in these institutions.

Art criticism is a highly distinctive form of unacademic writing. Presented in brief essays, usually quickly done, it's a form of journalism. Does that mean, then, that it stands in relation to art history in the same way that news stories stand to political history — as a valuable but ultimately humble source material? Is criticism just a tentative, first report on the reception of an artist or art form, an account that is

inevitably subject to judicious correction? That's how such initial commentary functions, one might argue, in the admirable art history books of T. J. Clark and Thomas Crow. But there is more to the story. Some of the greatest art critics — Clement Greenberg is one, Charles Baudelaire another — did not really write books. If art historians (myself among them) often discuss the genealogy and significance of on-the-spot criticism, we critics have not offered adequate accounts of our own practice. The critic frequently flirts with this or that idea without offering a substantial, fully developed analysis (if you are accustomed to fully developed arguments and historical context, then you will likely find most art criticism sketchy). And because the art critic reports in, frankly, highly personal terms, it's easy to assume that this writing is too subjective to be truly substantial.

Art critics are mostly self-taught. Some are poets, others philosophers, and some art historians. Teaching art history requires an advanced academic degree; art critics, by contrast, are in principle much freer. And that encourages experimentation. If some reputable editor will publish you, then you too are an art critic. An art historian needs to respond to the literature: my published essays on Caravaggio, Manet, and Piero della Francesca, for example, surveyed the very extensive prior commentaries on those artists. My first book on Poussin was inspired by critically reflecting on E. H. Gombrich's four-page essay about the painter's *Blind Orion Searching for the Rising Sun* (1658) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. An art historian needs access to a good library, for without doing the research you are likely to reinvent the wheel. And art historical research takes serious study time. But a critic only needs to visit the gallery or museum, pick up the checklist or catalogue, and go home to write. Criticism thus involves a different lifestyle.

To write for an academic journal, you usually need to be a specialist. And since scholars typically specialize in a single circumscribed period, there are precious few art historians who would be qualified to discuss, say, Artemisia Gentileschi, El Greco, and Giorgio de Chirico with equal authority. But an art critic can legitimately review exhibitions of all

three. Art history writing invariably includes footnotes, while art criticism does not. Length matters, for there is usually a big difference between writing a short review and presenting a full historical discussion. Consider three examples republished in this book, in which I attempt to expand the notion of the straightforward critical review, resulting in the antipode of academic specialization. When I dealt with a Gentileschi show in London, I included commentary on the limited opportunities available to her, as opposed to the large-scale commissions offered to her male contemporaries. When I reviewed a Parisian El Greco exhibition, I presented the paintings in terms of a theme I had long been thinking about, how his art mirrors his complex life story, spanning the cultures of Greece, Italy, and Spain. And when I wrote about Giorgio de Chirico's Milan show, I was interested in how the artist's controversial late work stood up. Erudite scholars develop such claims in full, while in the reviews republished here, I was merely concerned with evidence tracing these ideas in the exhibited works.

If you are not a specialist, then you are likely to make errors. And yet, concerned as I am with the problems inherent in a general critical practice, I think that there is real value in the coverage of divergent exhibitions, spanning art from the Sahara to Japanese book illustrations, alongside a variety of modernist and contemporary artists. To get a good picture of contemporary visual culture, you need to look at a a wide and eclectic range of visual expression. And it helps, as well, to look at fashion, comic strips, and public memorials and murals, for you need to consider also work from outside the mainstream art world.

There is, of course, a legitimate need for popularizing coverage of art exhibitions. But that's not exactly what concerns me here. Rather, my interests lie in the ways that the art critic can provide a valuable visual perspective, a useful prelude and supplement to art historical discussion. For me, the difference between the two forms of art writing is similar to Sean Scully's distinction between observational and abstract painters. Observational artists look at their subject, then to the painting. But an abstract artist replaces that "triangular relationship," as he terms it, with a dual correspondence, artist and painting, for Scully

contains within himself everything needed to make an abstract painting:

> I once watched a film of Cézanne painting. . . . Back and forth in a triangular relationship between the painter, the subject and the painting. This Morandi did also, since [he] was painting his jars or the view. . . . Always in a triangle. When I paint, I look at the canvas on the wall, and I paint it. I move back and forth between my seat and the painting, in a straight line, between me and the work. The painting being the subject and the object, all in one. There is no triangle. Everything I need to make the painting is in me when I start.

When writing as an art historian, I respond to the artist's body of literature as much as I do the work itself, my experience played against the scholarly commentaries, a triangular relationship. But when writing as an art critic, I respond directly to what I see, conditioned of course by prior reading. (The biggest challenge comes in writing about an artist who as yet has no literature, for then you have to start from scratch.) Obviously, of course, this is a contrast of extremes. Art historians do look at art, and critics read art history. Still, the comparison does bring out the way in which art history differs from art criticism. And it rationalizes why art history is considered an academic enterprise, while art criticism is not. Academics are trained in library research; learning to respond directly to what you see is a more elusive skill. Critics need to be face-to-face with as much art as possible. For all of its political problems, late-twentieth-century New York was a visual paradise for the art critic, with so much varied art to see.

When art is much written about, then often it is seen differently. When long ago I first saw Édouard Manet's *A Bar at the Folies Bergère* (1883) in London, it was a renowned but not much discussed picture. I remember as if yesterday sitting on the convenient sofa at the Courtauld Institute, making a diagram of the image in the mirror behind the bar and discovering that is not consistent in terms of the viewer's point of view and the barkeeper's pose. (Since then, in the new galleries that sofa has been removed.) Then thanks to a seminal essay by T. J. Clark, this picture became much more widely explored. And so now

everyone knows about the problems with this mirror-image. One book on the painting contains twelve interpretations. And so, even if you consider this approach entirely misguided, it's hard to write about the painting without allusion to this massive body of commentary. A similar shift has taken place with a famous contemporary artist like Scully. In the 1980s. commentators, myself among them and including Scully himself, worked out ways to understand his art, resulting in a situation in which it's now inappropriate to write about him without prior knowledge of these numerous commentaries.

Right at the birth of modernism, when these two literary genres, art criticism and art history, were created, they were both theorized by German philosophers. Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790) laid out the claim that evaluating art involves concept-free, intuitive judgments. Those judgments, based upon no rules, seek to be suasive. They are brief and dogmatic. And then Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics* (1826-9) argued that art is cultural expression, whose evaluation requires historicist thinking, for not all things are possible at all times. These accounts often are lengthy. To put this contrast in one sentence, Kant is the philosopher of art criticism, while Hegel is the philosopher of art history. This is why you can be a good critic without a vast knowledge of art history, and a successful art historian without much critical capacity. And it's why doing art history can be taught, while writing art criticism really cannot.

Criticism involves the articulation of an immediate, intuitive response. You look closely at the art, wait for your thoughts to settle, and write a persuasive description. This improvisational character of art criticism is akin to the ideal written record of a conversation — a conversation that you can have in the gallery with people you know, whether they are present or not, or even with the critics and historians whose writings you admire. Once I got to know Arthur Danto, I imagined talking with him. And then I learned to have such fictional discussions with other writers, including some I had never met.

Twenty-two some years ago I received a decisive lesson about this practice from the poet and critic Bill Berkson. We visited the Old Master museum of San Francisco, The Legion of the Palace of Honor, and looked at two works by the Venetian Pietro Longhi (1702-85), attractive genre paintings. Because these works aren't well known, we had to develop our own visual thinking on the spot. To improvise in this fashion presupposes, of course, that you have a well stocked mind and a good memory. Denis Diderot, the founding father of European art criticism, certainly did. "He ultimately came to realize that the best way to write about art was not simply to describe or assess the painting in front of him, but to take the time to have a conversation with himself." Well prepared artists, too, sometimes improvise visual conversations. The color field painter Jules Olitski, who spray painted his canvases, fantasized painting by suspending sprayed pigments in mid-air. That's a seductive experimental way of thinking. Perhaps critics can learn from Olitski.

In "The Performing Self" (1971), the literary critic Richard Poirier said that what excited Henry James, Robert Frost, and Norman Mailer "most in a work" is finally how it inspires each of them to be "a performer." The result is that "out of an accumulation of secretive acts emerges at last a form that presumes to compete with reality itself for control of the minds exposed to it." Art critics, too, can be performers who creatively sketch a worldview that supplements the art described. Barry Schwabsky has spelled out the suggestive implications of this point: "The meaning of an artwork is finally independent of its price and of its exhibition history because it's made and remade by anyone prepared to formulate a contribution to the creative act already embodied in it." He goes on to identify the implications of that claim in a way that would satisfy even the strictest philosopher. "'The viewer completes the work' really means that the work is never complete because, as long as the work still has life in it, others are always going to be completing it differently, making their own contribution to its ideal future." Like him, I too aspire to engage in remaking the works I describe. And what I have also learned from his writings, I would add, is that the critic aspires to be a systematic thinker.

Sometimes you don't properly value something until it disappears. By requiring the suspension of my usual travels, the coronavirus gave me the opportunity to think about criticism. There wasn't much art to see, but it was a good time for reading. In his classic *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death: The Arts, Religion, and Society in the Mid-Fourteenth Century* (1951), Millard Meiss describes how the plague interrupted the development of painting. "In the wake of the disasters of the 'forties and 'fifties . . . the established wealthy families of Florence very probably welcomed a less worldly and less humanistic art than that of the earlier years of the century." I'm not sure that our plague will have that effect. But it did inspire me to reread Boccaccio's account of the time of the black death, *Decameron* (1353). "In the face of so much affliction and misery, all respect for the laws of God and man had virtually broken down," he writes, "everyone was free to behave as he pleased." I wondered if the same thing would happen again. Perhaps not, but despite my awareness of these earlier plagues, I never expected to experience the effects of one myself. Then, after being taken aback by life, I read Frank M. Snowden's *Epidemics and Society: From the Black Death to the Present* (2019) — an instructive history that ends just before our current predicament began — I learned that I was overly optimistic. The medical experts knew that more plagues were forthcoming. Daniel Defoe's novel, *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), describes physical manifestations of disease quite different from those of our plague, but its scenes of agonized response have become all too familiar.

Breakdowns of social institutions are traumatic. And so a study of precedents may be instructive. A breakdown took place soon after August 1914 when the Great War destroyed three empires — the Austro-Hungarian, the Ottoman, and the Russian — and created the preconditions for German and Soviet totalitarianism. In *The Origins of the First World War* (1984), James Joll remarks, "Men are not motivated by a clear view of their own interests; their minds are filled with the cloudy residues of discarded beliefs; their motives are not always clear even to themselves."

Social institutions also broke down in communist Europe in 1989, when state socialism unexpectedly disappeared. The historian Stephen Kotkin asks:

> Who had anticipated that the Soviet Union would meekly dissolve itself? The few analysts who did perceive the depth of Soviet problems, and the structural impediments of solving them, never imagined that such a police state would just let go, quietly . . . a major riddle persists: why did the immense Soviet elite, armed to the teeth with loyal internal forces and weapons, fail to defend either socialism or the Union with all its might?

The very full account in Tony Judt's *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (2005) reveals the complexity of that change. With the demise of Marxism, he asks, "if there was no 'great cause' left; if the progressive legacy had run into the ground; if History, or necessity, could no longer be credibly invoked in defense of an act, a policy or a programme; then how should men decide the great dilemmas of the age?"

The difficulty of analyzing social systems applies also, I think, to the present art world. The breakdown of the current art world in 2020, though not as consequential as these disruptions, is also dramatic and unpredictable. I don't believe that I am the only person who has such concerns. In his very recent book on the art museum, Charles Saumarez Smith says, "As I look into the future, I see only uncertainty — exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic that is raging as I write. . . . This uncertainty is more absolute than at any previous time, including the two world wars. The old moral confidence in museums has gone." Such moments of crisis raise pre-existing conflicts to the surface, making radical progressive change thinkable. In *The Plague Year: America in the Time of Covid* (2021), Lawrence Wright remarks:

> Imagine a foreign adversary invaded America and killed half a million people. . . . Partisan differences would fall away as the American people joined as one to defend their countrymen. But our invader is not a human adversary: it is nature that we struggle against, and in the face of this conflict there is a curious passivity.

We live in interesting times.

In the 1990s I would make a review proposal, confer with the editor, write on a typewriter, and fax my review. And then a couple of months later, after editing, the hard copy journal would appear in my mail. For someone trained in the rhythms of academic publishing, in which it usually takes years for articles to appear, the comparative swiftness of this process was exhilarating. Many of the journals I had written for have now disappeared, at least in their print versions: *Arts Magazine*, *ArtInternational*, and *Tema Celeste*, to name just three. Like most forms of news coverage, art criticism has now moved from hard copy to online. And in making that move, I learned to write differently. Now I would find an exhibition and email my editor; then, if the project is accepted, I would return to the exhibition to take reference photos on my smartphone, and prepare to write a review. And often, even if I were alone, I would engage in a dialogue with a friend — an artist or curator in America or Europe — sometimes by sending images via email and getting an immediate response. Once, while riding in a cab, I texted the former director of a major institution to get his opinion of a controversial show. His reply caused me to rethink what I saw when I returned to the museum the next day. Challenging input can be very helpful.

And just as criticism is now written differently from past practice, so (I believe) it is read differently. In New York, only one large-circulation newspaper, *The New York Times*, seriously covers the art world. The *Brooklyn Rail* and *Hyperallergic,* both accessible for free online, are supported by advertising and donors. (The *Rail* is published in hard-copy as well as digitally.) When Joachim Pissarro and I were interviewing museum directors for the *Rail*, a worldly friend remarked, “The very successful directors of the Met and MoMA are the two most different men imaginable.” And I understood what he meant, for we had interviewed both of them. Analogously, these two publications, the *Brooklyn Rail* and *Hyperallergic*, are run by the most extraordinarily different men that you can imagine, Phong Bui and Hrag Vartanian, who have succeeded at a time when journalism is beleaguered.

It has been exciting for me in recent years to submit a swiftly written essay on Tuesday and see it published within a week, sometimes by the following Saturday. And these recently created publications contain a great deal of information, more than is available in any daily newspaper. In the July 2021 issue of the *Brooklyn Rail*, for example, you can find twenty-six exhibition reviews as well as interviews with contemporary artists. And *Hyperallergic* covers an astonishing variety of shows in this country and abroad. These publications review not only the major museum and gallery exhibitions, but also many shows found in obscure sites. And both publications also cover books, current affairs, music, and politics. That so much information is available will be a fine challenge for future art historians.

When I started writing criticism, much fashionable art writing used frankly esoteric language, accessible only to insiders. Now, however, the state of criticism has changed for the better. The writing in these online publications speaks to the larger public. And if more writers from outside the United States become involved, it will be possible to have truly international coverage. Because there is a great deal of interest in art, especially contemporary art, the potential readership for art criticism is enormous. In 2019, just before the virus, the Louvre had over nine million visitors, and the Uffizi about two million. The Venice Biennale had about half a million visitors and in my city, Pittsburgh, which is not a major tourist destination, more than 200,000 came to the cyclical survey show of contemporary art, the Carnegie International. And so the situation is promising if writers can make their work accessible to the larger public. When Diderot wrote about the eighteenth-century Parisian Salons, his commentary was circulated to Russian patrons, a very limited audience. Since his readers would not have seen these shows, and his reviews were not illustrated, he had to devote many words to describing the artworks. And, closer to our present day, Greenberg’s reviews generally didn’t have illustrations. Now, of course, online reviews are lavishly illustrated with color reproductions, freeing writers to focus on opinion and analysis.

In some ways, the concerns of our most important precursors, Diderot, Baudelaire, and Greenberg, are not so different from ours, though they wrote about very different art. Like critics today, they judged contemporary work, writing in a journalistic format, with occasional notes about theorizing. The Parisian Salons were densely hung displays judged by academicians and presented in the Louvre; by the mid-twentieth century, art dealers would play the most important role in the exhibition of new and novel art. Right now, the potentially most important change-in-progress, in response to the coronavirus, is the presentation and selling of art online, with technology offering a truly radical change to traditional modes of display.

In the 1980s and '90s I occasionally wrote for *Artforum*, then the leading American art journal. Our goal, as I understood it, was to provide highly selective coverage of what were identified as the leading exhibitions of contemporary art. That situation has changed. When artistic standards are in rapid flux, it's a mistake to pretend that even the most agile editor can identify all of the most important new art. Reviews help make it possible for the public to decide which art matters. Speed matters in criticism, because you need to capture the movement of your thoughts, which often may be swift. Eugène Delacroix once related to his champion Baudelaire an admonishment he made to a fellow artist: "If you have not sufficient skill to make a sketch of a man throwing himself out of a window, in the time that it takes him to fall from the fourth floor to the ground, you will never be capable of producing great *machines."* That is how an art critic also must often think. You need to respond quickly, in terms that will engage others who may, of course, disagree with your judgments. Georges Simenon, a famously swift writer, once wrote a complete detective novel in public in just a few days. Inspired by that model, I fantasize writing a review sitting face to face with the art that I am discussing.

As a philosopher, I seek to understand and interpret the dramatic changes in the art world system that the coronavirus has caused. For while it is difficult to describe a situation that is changing rapidly, it is imperative in my opinion to offer this larger perspective. As I write, the

masked art world is returning to life. And so it's very hard to predict even its near future. Long-overdue changes in the canon are surely destined to continue. And there are reinforced concerns to rethink the museum. Much depends, of course, upon the state of the economy. In my first draft for this Introduction, I included a discussion of the politics of gender and race, and the economics of the art museum. But, upon reflection, I have removed that material. (Some of these thoughts were subsequently published in the online journal *artcritical.com* and the Italian newspaper *Domani*. A listing is included at the end of this introduction.) As the Greek painter Apelles famously said to a craftsman who wanted to discuss matters that he didn't really understand, "cobbler, stick to your last." Criticism provides an important window on the art world, but critics generally have only limited practical knowledge of how galleries and museums function. Sometimes we complain that our writings have little if any effect on the economic life of the art world. Compared with artists, art dealers, and curators, the critic's place is marginal. It's relatively rare, in my long experience, to get any response to the publication of a review, other than a complaint about typos. But in truth, we critics need to be both realistic about the limits of our power and arrogant in the trust we place in what we do best: making personal judgments unswayed by public opinion. Our art world may need critics, but it hasn't figured out how to support them. That said, the worst occupational hazard is cynicism, for then it's impossible to respond with the necessary idealism to contemporary art.

Ideally, as Schwabsky's analysis suggests, the art world of the critic is a community, a place where real debate can take place. This of course is the concern of Kant in his discussion of Enlightenment, though unfortunately in old age he didn't discuss this link between aesthetic judgments and politics. Out of free discussion, we hope that a real consensus can emerge. In the art world, as in politics more generally, the undue financial power of extreme wealth threatens to make honest debate impossible. And yet our contemporary art world needs grand financial support. And so it's important for critics to balance economic realism with free critical discussion. Focused on a narrow domain

within the larger social world, art criticism provides an important record of the intellectual life of our culture.

These selections — all but one of which are from my recently published art criticism — fall into four parts. I look at some political issues within the art world: critiques of museums, race, and the role of art criticism. I present some reviews of older art. I deal with contemporary art in the galleries and museums. Finally, section four looks at art outside of the art world: comics, public art, and some memorials. And then in the brief conclusion I offer some lessons learned from these reviews. Because we art critics do short essays, it's useful to consider the cumulative effect of our thinking. Hence the importance of such collections of our writings. I was inspired to gather these materials by Schwabsky's *The Observer Effect: On Contemporary Painting* (2020), the book I quoted earlier. That collection of criticism amounts to something more than the sum of its parts, for his critical voice emerges when you synthesize successive reviews. And so I hope that my own critical voice, which is different from his, can be heard by readers of this book. I have kept the titles given by my editors. All of the published reviews are accessible online.

Recent essays not included in this volume include:

ArtCritical.com. "The People's MoMOA"
https://artcritical.com/2021/06/05/david-carrier-on-the-moma-protests/

Domani:

CULTURA
La crisi dei musei d'arte deriva dalle loro contraddizioni
13 marzo 2022 •

CULTURA
Il fallimento afghano raccontato dall'arte dei tappeti di guerra
29 agosto 2021 •

CULTURA
L’arte di New York con il virus si è trasferita negli Hamptons
23 agosto 2021 •

CULTURA
Le proteste per la rivoluzione al MoMA di New York
20 giugno 2021 •

CULTURA
L’arte americana ha un problema con gli artisti afroamericani
07 marzo 2021 •

CULTURA
Il declino tira fuori il peggio dalle persone, come nell’assalto al Congresso