



**NCECA
JOURNAL
1994 - 95**



A CRITICAL LOOK AT CONTEMPORARY ART CRITICISM

Moderated by Judith S. Schwartz

Panelists: Diane Douglas, Ron Glown, Peter Schjeldahl

by Judith S. Schwartz

At a symposium I chaired at New York University two years ago entitled "Criticism in the Craft Arts: Crossings, Alignments, and Territories," the attendees attempted to explore, over a two-day period, the major issues surrounding craft criticism. In reality, they explored the larger, more pervasive problems existing in art criticism in general.

The critical thinking required when writing about art, just like the critical thinking required when making art, is impossibly difficult—but when issues of language, theory, the marketplace, education, the publications, galleries, museums, ethics, politics, let alone the artists' intent enter the fray, the complexities of criticism define infinity.

It is for me, therefore, a distinct delight to continue this dialog in the area of art criticism, and particularly here at the NCECA conference, where the methods and practices of evaluating the work we do keep our work alive and vital, and needs constant attention.

The need is even greater now when there are so many important issues facing art critics: questions of ethics, diminished writing venues, issues of quality, and funding. In addition, many of us involved with teaching are recognizing the need to address the critical studies programs within our institutions, programs which traditionally concentrated on the techniques of making art and/or art history.

Moreover, given recent events in the world, art is seen in a wider multicultural context of politics, nationalism and ideologies. Even within our own shores, obstacles to multiculturalism and battles over censorship are challenging traditional art institutions, artists and critics. It is imperative that we

bring these issues to our classrooms and studios to debate, understand and create.

An article in *Editor and Publisher* magazine examined the burgeoning interest in art in the United States by citing some interesting statistics.¹ The article demonstrated how it is good business to hire more art editors and critics. They noted that there are 1,675 major art museums, 1,000 art galleries, and 1,314 museum branches which in turn has led to a huge increase in the number of art editors on local newspapers, with the consequent appointment of an almost equal number of art critics.

No doubt the thousands of graduates of art schools every year turn to the art pages for news and reviews. But the general public has also been drawn in with the proliferation of a new breed of artist—"the art star," where large-scale museum exhibitions are turned into hit, hype shows. Many of these are responsive to market pressures and the supporting social, institutional and commercial structures. News about crazy prices and long waiting lists to buy the hot new star have in many ways distanced a truly sophisticated audience who want to know what really is going on.

All this has made the field of writing about art all the more significant. What responsibility does the critic have in reporting what is happening? What is or should be the role of the critic and their publishing vehicles in expanding experience and understanding? How can critics keep from becoming publicity machines for the art stars, or the blue chip galleries which feed the notion of art as entertainment and investment commodities?

Jed Perl, in a 1992 *New Republic* article titled "The Art Nobody Knows," makes the distinction between what used to be two distinct art worlds—one public; the other, the private art world of artists.² The public art world was an outgrowth of the artists' world and had value only insofar as it reflected the significant developments which existed in the artists' art world. The public art world included exhibitions at the major museums, articles in popular magazines such as *Time*, international shows like the Venice Biennale, or at blue chip galleries. The artists' art world, on the other hand, included all of the above but much more. Says Mr.

Perl, "The artists were certainly aware of the coverage in the glossy magazines, but they were also concerned with the discussions in the artists clubs, and the hundreds of short reviews of exhibitions that appeared in the art magazines each and every month and added up to a blow-by-blow account of what artists were doing." He continues, "Art that made it uptown had its origins downtown. A public reputation was only of value to the extent that it was seconded by artists, and those reputations were generally formed in the artists' art world. Criticism was based not in terms of success in the public world but in terms of the value the work had among peers." He concludes by stating that now as the public art world has become self-perpetuating, the private art world has become increasingly isolated, fragmented and frozen.

If this is true, the role of the critic may be all the more significant. Critics do form taste and should educate. They can play a major role in the shape of things to come.

Well, what do the critics think about their role? Do their roles change in response to the artist as social critic? How do critics develop standards to evaluate the world of multicultural artists? Is art criticism meant to support art making, or is it an independent form in itself? And what ever happened to Beauty?

"I would hate to be defined as just an art critic," says Robert Hughes. "I'm a writer. If I'm not, then I've wasted my time."³ Hughes has been covering art for *Time* magazine since 1970, and some think of him as a reflexive anti-post modernist, which he flatly denies, saying in defense that it is just that so much of the stuff he sees in today's Art is crap.

Michael Kimmelman, chief art critic of *The New York Times*, commented that "one troubling aspect of criticism at the moment, despite the variety, is that there are too many critics who are held hostage by fashion—whether it's political fashion, intellectual fashion, esthetic fashion, or a combination of all three."⁴ He adds further, "Not long ago, you couldn't open an exhibition catalog without seeing the same set of footnotes—citations from Walter Benjamin, Michael Foucault, and Jean Baudrillard—no matter who the artist was. It seems

to me this writing is often a veneer of sophistication that masks shallow thinking and serves to provide a pseudo-justification for works of art that are uninteresting, just incredibly thin."⁵

Kay Larson of *New York Magazine* feels that criticism has broken down into two extreme positions. She says, "One finds oneself articulating theoretical positions, and the other is the I like it—I don't like it school."⁶

When Christopher Knight, critic at the *Los Angeles Times*, was asked about the state of art criticism, he answered, "It's grim. I don't read that much criticism any more. It's as impossible and weird to make criticism as art."⁷

Robert Storr, a curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, wrote that we are in an "increasingly constricted and mean spirited cultural moment . . . whose mean spirited . . . the critics. We are now witnessing too many personal attacks and not enough discussions of the art. An awful lot of criticism questions people's good faith or qualifications. I would always be in favor of someone who had a generous spirit and makes enthusiastic errors in judgement about the long-term value of a work of art rather than someone who has a stingy spirit and devotes their energy to protecting surefire things while attacking others."⁸

Well, as you can see, my job as moderator is, fortunately, just to raise issues. I leave the hard work, the task of dealing with these issues, hopefully, to my panelists.

NOTES

- ¹ Deitch, Joseph. "Art is News," *Editor and Publisher*, Vol. 123, No. 9, March 3, 1990, pp. 27-28.
- ² Perl, Jed. "The Art Nobody Knows," *New Republic*, Vol. 207, No. 17, October 19, 1992, pp. 32-40.
- ³ Jenkins, Nicholas. "The Critics: Clarity and Distance That Does Not Exclude Love," *ARTNews*, Vol. 91, September 1992, p. 84.
- ⁴ Madoff, Steven. "The Critics: Clarity and Distance That Does Not Exclude Love," *ARTNews*, Vol. 91, September 1992, p. 87.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*