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This special supplement documents the revisions to James Elkins' *A Look at Contemporary Art Criticism, Part 1: Art Criticism Is too Easy* that first appeared in Volume 33 Number 1 (September/October 2018) of the *New Art Examiner*.

A Look at Contemporary Art Criticism **Part 1: Art Criticism Is too Easy** (Revised)

by James Elkins

This is the first part of a two-part look at art criticism. Here I'll list some of the literature on art criticism written in the last twenty years, and sketch the case that art criticism has become too easy.

The second part ([newartexaminer.org/archive/Vol 33 No 2 Electronic Version.PDF](http://newartexaminer.org/archive/Vol%2033%20No%202%20Electronic%20Version.PDF)) reports on a new survey of art criticism, and on six emerging tendencies.

Thanks to everyone on social media who commented on Part One. Please send all comments, criticism, suggestions to jelkins@saic.edu. These two texts will be revised for publication, and I'll name all the contributors in the text.

1. Introduction

It's been sixteen years since the October roundtable on art criticism, fifteen years since my pamphlet, *What Happened to Art Criticism?*, and eleven since my book, *The State of Art Criticism*.¹ The pamphlet made the claim that art critics had turned from judging—which they did since the Greeks—to describing, evoking, and praising.

I didn't have an explanation for that turn, but it was wonderfully quantified by a Columbia University National Arts Journalism survey of North American art critics, which proved that the majority of the country's top critics—as measured by the number of readers of their publications, not their content—thought that a critic's job is to describe and not to judge.² (There is, at last, a new survey, which I will report on in Part Two.)

There is a lot to say about that turn. It's partly an effect of the art market and its understandable lack of interest in bad reviews. It can also be correlated with the rise of conceptual art, minimalism, and the anti-aesthetic, all of which drove serious criticism into the academy. But the main social effect of the turn is that it provokes resistance: many critics don't want to think of themselves as people who just describe art.

The feeling that art criticism is in retreat continues to inspire a steady stream of conferences with titles like "Crisis of Art Criticism," "Future of Art Criticism," and "End of Art Criticism." In the years since my pamphlet appeared, I have attended conferences and lectured on the subject in Colombia, Belgium, France, the UK, Ireland, Norway, Denmark, Estonia, Russia, Germany, South Africa, Uganda, the Netherlands, Portugal, South Korea, Japan, Australia, and China, and I have published several essays on the state of art criticism.³

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A big book is currently being edited by Steve Knudsen at the Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD);

it has essays by Arthur Danto, Peter Schjeldahl, Luis Camnitzer, Blake Gopnik, and Barry Schwabsky, among many others.⁴ I've also made a study of what counts as judgment in art criticism (short answer: no one knows), and whether or not art criticism is becoming—or already is—a global phenomenon, essentially the same no matter where in the world it's practiced.⁵

This is all by way of saying I try to keep up with the field, even though of course it's impossible for any one person to read more than an infinitesimal percentage of the criticism written in English, not to mention the many traditions of criticism that are written in other languages.

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So how do things look in 2018? Here are some quick answers:

(1) Art criticism is not returning to judgment. That change is a long-term shift, from a modernist perspective to a postmodern (or postcolonial, or metamodern, or “contemporary”) one.

(2) Art criticism is proliferating, but there is no reason to assume that it is read in proportion to its volume. Who reads all the comments on YouTube videos? Who reads all of e-flux?

(3) Most art criticism is conventional. There is a lot of truth to the claim that art writing has become a sort of grammatically complexified, academically hypnotized, awkwardly written, polysyllabic “International Art English.”⁶ (Think of *October*'s many descendants.) On the other hand, much online art criticism today is studiously informal and conversational, featuring generous displays of plain speaking, corn, slang, confidences, and in-jokes. (Think of Jerry Saltz, whose writing gets weird when it's sober.) The two kinds of writing are usually posed as opposites, but they are both conventional. The one is as predictable as the other.

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2. Attempts to Revive Art Criticism

What's to be done? There are some initiatives outside academia to revive art criticism. (I count *Nonsite*, *Grey Room*, and others as academic: their papers correspond closely in length, mode of argument, and potential readership to essays in *October* and elsewhere.) Among recent non-academic publications, *n+1* stands out, and so does some of e-flux, *MOMUS*, and *Hyperallergic*, among many others.

MOMUS's subtitle is “A Return to Art Criticism,” and it promises “art criticism that is evaluative, accountable, and brave.” Some of the writing does that, but I think it could do more. Kristian Madsen's review of Manifesta 12, for example, raises important points about biennales: the work in Palermo is often documentary, he says, full of “geopolitical information,” and driven by causes and messages; it plays to the liberal art world that doesn't need convincing; and it doesn't make use of art's strengths, which he lists as “ambiguity, abstraction, self-consciousness.”⁷ “Who's all this for?” Madsen asks at one point.

The essay, “Courting Exhaustion: Manifesta's Dog Days,” is certainly “evaluative,” but, in order to make a lasting contribution to the literature on Manifesta or biennales, it needs to be expanded: there's no reason not to consider biennale culture in general (here he could have made use of John Clark's dyspeptic criticism), and he could have been more historically reflective about his criteria (ambiguity, abstraction, and self-consciousness aren't simply art's strengths; they have histories and politics of their own in modernism).

Even in publications like *MOMUS*, where art criticism can be pointed and argumentative, it also tends to be impressionistic, informal, and not linked to the historical and philosophic discourses that underwrite its concerns.

One solution is brief notes on very specific issues. For me the exemplar here is Hal Foster, who has worked this way for a decade or more. He writes position papers—short polemics couched as reviews—in places like the *London Review of Books* (for example, a review of Hito Steyerl's *Duty Free Art*⁸), *Grey Room*, and *Texte zur Kunst* (for instance, a review of Ruben Östlund's *The Square*⁹). The short format and narrow focus help him define and clarify particular positions.

Another strategy is to consolidate your criticism into books. A good example is Jan Verwoert, some of whose essays have been collected by Sternberg Press in association with the Piet Zwart Institute in Rotterdam.¹⁰

In Cork, Ireland, I once had a disagreement with Jan about the reading public for art criticism. I said it was scattered and often unknowable, and I cited the fact that conferences on the “crisis of art criticism” tend to reinvent the wheel because the organizers don’t always know the literature.

He said I was wrong, and that, from his point of view, the world of readers of art criticism was coherent, knowable, and engaged, and that work could be done with the knowledge that previous texts would be taken into account. His experience is not mine, but I hope he is more right than I am.

3. What Might Count as Radical Criticism?

Here, to end, are three more examples of writing that I consider interesting art criticism. These are more radical than Foster or Verwoert: they are neither colloquial “plain style” nor intricate IAE (International Art English). I name them just to suggest how many more possibilities there are for art criticism. (Please note: these aren’t ideas for contemporary art criticism; I’ll explore those in Part Two. These are examples of writing about art that is outside the norms of contemporary art criticism, just to show how much more is out there.)

(1) Fausto De Sanctis’s *Money Laundering Through Art: A Criminal Justice Perspective* is an example of work that considers the global art market not as a place where identities are constructed or oppositional voices are articulated (as academic writing generally proposes), nor as a place where the global economy is on display (as financial reporting on the arts usually implies), but as an opportunity for money laundering.¹¹

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The people involved need to have some expertise in visual art, cultural heritage, and the antiquities trade, but those specialties can often be obtained by hiring specialists.¹² De Sanctis does not intend to write art criticism, but his approach is in effect a complete change from the status quo in art criticism: he is unconcerned about aesthetics, history, or meaning – in fact he’s even more detached than sociologists of art such as Pierre Bourdieu. For De Sanctis, all that matters is understanding the art market well enough to see how best to intervene.

(2) Craig Clunas’s *Elegant Debts: The Social Art of Wen Zhengming* is an outstanding example of what happens when social art history is consistent about its commitment to political and social meaning.¹³ The artist Wen Zhengming (1470–1559) was one of the principal scholar (or *literati*) inkbrush painters of the Ming Dynasty, as prominent in Chinese painting history as, say, Poussin or Bernini in Europe.

Clunas’s book is unique not only in context of studies of Wen Zhengming or Chinese inkbrush painting, but also in the much larger field of social art history. Clunas says next to nothing about Wen’s compositions. His concern is nearly exclusively the value that Wen’s paintings had as objects of gift exchange in the social network of Ming Dynasty scholars and bureaucrats.

Like other scholar-painters, Wen used his paintings in trade, and Clunas did a great deal of archival work to show exactly how that was done. The book is therefore deeply counterintuitive because Wen’s paintings are not treated as visual objects. The book is a tremendous accomplishment in counter-intuitive art criticism, demonstrating that social interactions can be as rich and nuanced a way to understand art as formal analysis and the other conventional tools of visual interpretation.¹⁴

(3) Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* is, among many other things, a work of experimental art criticism. There are indices of hundreds of actual artworks that Proust refers to in the book; in that respect, it is one of the most thorough records of conservative early 20th century French taste. It also has a famous theory of art, which divides aesthetic memories into intentional and inadvertent.

What makes it experimental art criticism is the fact that, in several crucial passages, Proust mixes fiction and nonfiction in the description of visual art. There is an intensely visual description of a church in the invented town of Combray; the literary critic Germaine Brée argued that when Proust wrote the passage he was looking at a reproduction of Vermeer’s *View of Delft*.¹⁵

The art historian Benjamin Binstock has suggested that, later in the novel, when Proust describes Vermeer’s painting, he was not looking either at the original or a reproduction, because he focuses on a small detail—a yellow wall—that is not present in the painting. In the course of Proust’s six volumes, these relations become substantially more complex. The church at Combray is connected to other churches, and Vermeer’s painting is connected to other paintings. The result is a fusion of an actual painting, a reproduction

of that painting, a memory of that reproduction, other fictional and nonfictional paintings, and an imaginary church. Considered as art criticism, *In Search of Lost Time* is significantly more radical and complex than contemporary art writing.¹⁶

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Discussions about the “crisis” of art criticism—its disappearance from print media, its descent into academic jargon, its dissolution in the unread reaches of the internet—all bypass the fact that it is increasingly predictable. I would like to be seriously challenged by art criticism: I want to not recognize what I’m reading, not understand the claims, and not see the structure. I’d like art criticism to make good on the values it celebrates in art: difficulty, novelty, independence, modernism. ■

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Notes:

- 1 *What Happened to Art Criticism?* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press [distributed by University of Chicago Press], 2003), now also in Chinese, Spanish, and Swedish; *The State of Art Criticism*, co-edited with Michael Newman, vol. 4 of *The Art Seminar*, with contributions by Stephen Melville, Dave Hickey, Irit Rogoff, Guy Brett, Katy Deepwell, Joseph Masheck, Peter Plagens, Julian Stallabrass, Alex Alberro, Whitney Davis, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, and others (New York: Routledge, 2007).
- 2 Currently online at tinyurl.com/y8xkvo2u.
- 3 The two most recent are (1) the “Afterword,” in *Judgment and Contemporary Art Criticism*, edited by Jeff Khonsary and Melanie O’Brian (Vancouver: Artspeak, Fillip Editions, 2010); this is a response to Diedrich Diederichsen, Maria Fusco, Tom Morton, Jeff Derksen, Sven Lütticken, and Tirdad Zolghadr, and (2) an essay, “Why Thinking about Judgment in Art Criticism is Difficult,” forthcoming in a conference volume on the state of judgment in art criticism, from Ruhr University Bochum and the Leuphana University of Lüneburg, edited by Stephanie Marchal.

- 4 *The Art of Critique*, edited by Stephen Knudsen, forthcoming; I wrote the Introduction, “Art Critiques: Forgotten Children of the Academy,” which responds to each of the book’s essays.
- 5 The latter is “Are Art Criticism, Art Theory, Art Instruction, and the Novel Global Phenomena?,” *Journal of World Philosophies* 3 (2018), online; the essay is a chapter in a book called *The Impending Single History of Art*, and it is posted as a Google Doc online at tinyurl.com/yb3kg7oz.
- 6 Alix Rule and David Levine, “International Art English,” *Triple Canopy*, 2012, online at www.canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/international_art_english.
- 7 Kristian Madsen, “Courting Exhaustion: Manifesta’s Dog Days,” *Momus.ca*, momus.ca/courting-exhaustion-manifesta-dog-days (July 6, 2018).
- 8 Hal Foster, “Smash the Screen,” *London Review of Books*, April 5, 2018, behind the paywall.
- 9 www.textezurkunst.de/109/transgression-vigilance
- 10 COOKIE!, edited by Vivian Sky Rehberg and Marnie Slater (Sternberg Press, 2014), www.sternberg-press.com/?pageId=1490.
- 11 Berlin: Springer Verlag, 2013.
- 12 See Beatriz Picard, “Art Market and Money Laundering: A Pretty Disguise for an Ugly Reality,” 2018, paper available on academia.edu.
- 13 University of Hawai’i Press / London: Reaktion, 2004.
- 14 I have written about the consequences of this approach in *Chinese Landscape Painting as Western Art History*, with an introduction by Jennifer Purtle (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), reviewed in *International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) Newsletter* 57 (2011), *Art Bulletin* 93 no. 2 (2011): 249–52, and *History and Theory* 51 (February 2012).
- 15 Proust’s description of the church is enhanced by painterly sorts of details. There is a striking line, for example, about “flakes and gum-like dribbles of sun,” *des écailles et des egouttements gommeux de soleil*.
- 16 See Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, translated by C. K. Scott Moncrieff, Terence Kilmartin, and D. J. Enright, 2003, vol. 1, pp. 58–9, 252, 256; Brée, “Proust’s Combray Church: Illiers or Vermeer?,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 112, 1968, pp. 5–7; and Binstock, *Vermeer’s Family Secrets: Genius, Discovery, and the Unknown Apprentice*, 2008. This is discussed in a book I am co-authoring with Erna Fiorentini, *Visual Worlds* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming). Other examples of adventurous writing in this sense, especially criticism that mixes fact and invention: Jean-Louis Schefer’s radical book on Uccello, discussed on my site “What is Interesting Writing in Art History?,” on Lulu or at tinyurl.com/ya3thvfa; and Gilles Deleuze’s approach to the reproductions of Bacon in the original French edition of his book *Logic of Sensation* (the English translation is not illustrated, which ruins Deleuze’s visual project), on Academia.edu or tinyurl.com/ya3pxdn9.