



Book cover of the 2006 released *Critical Mess: Art Critics on the State of Their Practice*, edited by Raphael Rubinstein by Hard Pressed Editions Inc.

Critical Mess and After **A Continued Reflection on the State of Art Criticism- Part 1** by Steve Rockwell

I've had a copy of *Critical Mess: Art Critics on the State of Their Practice* for about nine years now. Thank you Chris Chambers for passing it along to me! Reading it, turned out to be a case of random snacking. Then during a two-week vacation last December, I resolved to make a proper meal out of it. It's now March and I find myself making buggies in tulip time, while trying to get the fly out of the fly bottle. Put another way, to engage in art criticism as a practice, is having to accept its diminished role as an influence on course of the art and artists that are being exhibited. The present state of

affairs has generally been linked to the eclipse of modernism, 50 years in and counting. These days, the tank that supplies the helium to the bubble that comprises the making and selling of art, however, seems bottomless. For myself, getting the fly out of the fly bottle, is just the delicate fishing out of the appropriate words to describe all this.

Buggy-making in Tulip Time was Michael Duncan's contributing essay to *Critical Mess*. Duncan got the buggy-making analogy from Randall Jarrell, who had bemoaned the writing of verse as a dying art in the way that blacksmithing of carriages gave

way to automobiles. Smithing verse and making buggies, he observed, was just as prevalent as ever. Getting people to read and ride them was the problem. How did this come about? Duncan argues that, under the watch of critics like Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg, "abstract painting seemed to live up to rigorous formal and conceptual standards. Any power once held by art critics is now almost completely dissipated." He maintains, "It is no secret that the burgeoning of the "emerging artist" market has been orchestrated by an inbred cabal of dealers, collectors, and auction house reps who pick the representatives of each season's "cutting-edge." Critics no longer question the new art-stars."

Duncan compared the current youth cult to the short-lived Tulipmania of the 17th century, where prices for a single bouquet soared to as much as \$44,000. These days, the analogy holds equally well for the art market. In Don Thompson's 2008 book *The 12 Million Dollar Stuffed Shark: The Curious Economics of Contemporary Art*, Damien Hirst's deteriorating tiger shark work serves as an example of all that is misguided about the art market today. Thompson sees branding as having been substituted for critical judgment in the frenzy that often accompanies



Art critic Jerry Saltz at Galerie Lelong's March 21, 2007 release party of *Critical Mess: Art Critics on the State of Their Practice*

the valuation and acquisition of contemporary art. If the natural world teaches us anything, it is that flesh rots and tulip petals fall.

Raphael Rubinstein, the editor of *Critical Mass* tapped Arthur C. Danto as a critic influential enough to have been part of the problem, the precipitation of the slide away from value judgment. In Danto's contribution to the book, *The Fly in the Fly Bottle: The Explanation and Critical Judgment of Works of Art*, the critic defended his position, citing pluralism as the condition in recent art that makes value judgments on divergent art practices problematic, or to use his word, "forced." He compared it to deciding between red and white wines from separate French regions, or a 50's Joan Mitchell painting to a 90's Brice Marden. Danto saw each to be good in its own way, and didn't see this as much of a problem. Showing the fly how to get out of the fly bottle is the role played by art education. It's how Wittgenstein had described his own agenda as a philosopher in helping people find their way.

Danto's blithe acceptance of art's pluralism may have had something to do with timing. He had found his footing as a critic at the moment when Greenberg had outlived his moment. The scope of Greenberg's philosophy of art had not been wide enough to encompass Duchamp, Warhol, and much of the art that followed. His eschewal of any hint of figuration or modeling in art presumed a rigid linearity to modernism from painterly to post-painterly with nowhere else to go. Eventually, the furniture in the room of Greenberg's brand of modernism had either been chucked out or had worn out. It was time for modernism to vacate. It's worth posing the question, if Greenberg had been generous enough in his definition of modernism, would there be any need for the word post in modern at all? Half a century after the fact, every point of reference of the contemporary art being produced today, may still be traced to at least one of the many isms that modernism has spawned.

In any case, the argument over whether a piece of art is post or not postmodern is academic. The wrangle is essentially over the particulars in the autopsy report on the corpus of modernism and perhaps art itself. Donald Kuspit mounts a compelling case on the issue in his *The End of Art* (2005), claiming that art is over and done with, drained of its aesthetic import, universal human truths, and everything generally associated with the transcendent, sacred, or what is commonly referred to as high art. The qualities are specific to the Kantian-



Art critic Clement Greenberg

Greebergian tradition, aspects of art which Thomas McEvilly in his *The Tomb of the Zombie* contribution to *Critical Mass*, maintained ought to be buried. "The universality of esthetic judgment," is in his mind an "absurd crypto-religious claim." His concluding comments made at the Congress of the International Association of Art Critics in Stockholm in 1994 amounted to a eulogy, amusingly ironic in its call to forget rather than remember the departed, "Fundamentally, I thought this conference in which art critics barely mentioned art or art criticism was on the right track and that might even be enough to induce me to join

this organization someday."

Clearly, critic Jerry Saltz holds to the conviction that art is not quite ready to give up its ghost. His essay *Seeing Out Loud* makes an impassioned case for value judgment, blaming academics, or as he says "esthete-scientists" for belittling art, reducing it to "sets of simplistic, supposedly 'objective' dualisms like mind-body, reason-imagination, abstract-representational, thinking-feeling, etc." Instead of shrinking from making judgments, Saltz is fearless in his role as a critic, often taking extreme positions. He sees art as part of a "universal force," a distinct form of knowledge, no less valid than science, philosophy, or religion. His chapter title, *The Whole Ball of Wax Theory of Art* implies that art may help to integrate the many facets of our life experience. In this, Saltz reiterates art's connection historically with the sublime. Citing the example of a Tibetan mandala and its scrutiny inducing a sense of the cosmos not unlike the viewing of an Agnes Martin grid painting or a Rothko.

The polarity of views between Kuspit and Saltz bears reflection. With Saltz, the tissue of the body of art is vitalized if we can somehow grasp its wholeness, climbing high or deep enough to connect its internal and external parts, mandala-fashion. Some form of the transcendent seems to be a requirement of art to maintain its health. Cutting this plumb line between art's depth and height is to sever the flow of its blood and oxygen. According to Kuspit, it is exactly these consequences that we are living with – emptiness and stagnancy. We find ourselves now in an era of "postart," the term invented by Alan Kaprow. Hallmarks of this new visual category is the elevation of the banal over the enigmatic, the scatological over the sacred, and cleverness over creativity. The evil phantom hovering over the corpse of art is, of course, Marcel Duchamp, who's avowed loathing of the retinal in art has its fulfillment in an era of anti-aesthetic postmodern art.

The sharpest jibes leveled at critics who "dare to judge artworks" came

from Lane Relyea in his *All Over And At Once* essay for *Critical Mess*. He singled out Jerry Saltz, Peter Schjeldahl, Christopher Knight, and Raphael Rubinstein for particular scorn, who, in his mind, “pass themselves off as rightful heirs to Greenberg,” not failing to remind their readers in every article that “they proudly belong to the besieged minority who still practice criticism the old-fashioned way.” Relyea recognizes that the shift of focus away from quality to ideology came with the professionalization of criticism and its refuge in academia, something that characterized the lapse of modernism into postmodernism. Criticism as education rose to the fore, accruing rigor and respect within the university, while criticism as judgment ebbed, resulting in a “splintering, stunting, and decentering brought on by too much specialization and the collapse of any overarching belief system.”

According to Relyea, with their “humanist” approach critics in the mold of Saltz, Knight, Schjeldahl, and Rubinstein, “happily sell out the modernist project instead of struggling to keep united thought and feeling, intuition and understanding, as modernists attempted, they proudly abandon thinking, denounce any tie between what they feel and the larger world, and gleefully orphan their sensations within a hermetically sealed privacy, exactly the disaster modernist critics tried to forestall.”

Both modernist and postmodernist models, in Relyea’s view, are “shriveled up versions” of their former selves. The postmodern critic is less critical than conformist, while the modernist is “too dimwitted to act.” Our way out, he argues is an art that engages us on multiple levels, drawings us in, at the same time provoking a healthy critical dialogue. Relyea cites the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres as exemplary in delivering this productive tension, work that goes beyond mere reference, but has absorbed the accomplishments of an impressive range of art styles. The candy spills of Gonzalez-Torres bring to mind Pop and process art, his poster stacks Minimalism, and the

monochrome images on the posters Color-Field.

While Relyea’s method of criticism succeeds in framing, in this case, the work of Gonzales-Torres within the limits of the gallery space itself, it fails to check and account for the ever-expanding lateral drift that contemporary art continues to undergo. The visible space that any given art occupies, amounts to a fraction of the multi-layered non-visual structures that lurk behind its presentation. Even before the viewer has broken through the doors of the actual gallery space, the work of the artist has been packaged and sealed with the gallery brand and its stable of artists. The impact on the viewing experience of the work of an artist, in the context of say, one of the many Gagosian galleries, cannot be underestimated. The potential buyer and a particular collecting esthetic

continues to widen the frame of reference to the exhibited art. Add a museum curator or two and we are very near to describing the exhibition of the “art-star” promulgated by what Duncan called the “inbred cabal of dealers, collectors, and auction house reps who pick the representatives of each season’s ‘cutting-edge.’”

Small wonder that the power exuded by the colossus that often makes up the machinery of exhibition has a tendency to drain the calories out of the art experience, leaving the viewer underwhelmed and undernourished. The recent *Art News* article, *Go Pro: The Hyper-Professionalization of the Emerging Artist* by Daniel S. Palmer, the Leon Levy Assistant Curator at the Jewish Museum in New York, describes his “casual” visit to an artist’s studio in Brooklyn. Upon arrival, Palmer is greeted by an assistant, the artist’s dealer, and followed by yet another



Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917, one of 17 replicas in existence, commissioned by Duchamp in the 1960s

representative from the gallery, something like a director of museum relations. With Palmer's continued reiteration of the purpose of his visit, comes the realization of "just how complicit curators often are these days in legitimizing mediocre work being aggressively pushed for the sake of financial gain. The artist in question was still only 20-something."

It would seem that the the old-fashioned critic who makes value judgments, is needed more than ever, as the "sensible" aspects of art are benumbed and made insensible either by excessive ideology or the weight of the art-star system bearing down on it. The lateral procession of art from the gallery context to non-art, however, continues unabated. Duncan opened his essay for *Critical Mess* with a reference to Venessa Beecroft and his intention of writing a negative review on her "inine" performance, only to learn that he not been the first to queue up, and had "clearly fallen for the bait." As he noted, "In the new Dark Ages all reviews are endorsements." The title of the February 2016 review in *Art News* would indicate that Beecroft neither needs galleries nor the endorsements of art critics: *The Most-Viewed Work of Performance Art in Hlstory: Vanessa Beecroft on Ditching the Art World for Kanye West*. Is this a case of Beecroft making an exit from the art world, or is it one of Kanye West invading it? It may be time to start listing the ingredients in the new homogenized art, especially with the induction of Lady Gaga and the recent canonization of David Bowie.

The 1966, Q&A that Bruce Glaser conducted with Frank Stella and Donald Judd for *ARTnews* seems eerily freshly-minted. Both artists back then had felt that there was nowhere left to go with painting, and that anything new had already been done. Painting was over. To continue, meant the production of more hackneyed formalism, something we now call "zombie formalism." Stella had no need for what he called relational painting, balancing one thing with another, a practice associated with



Ad Reinhardt: Abstract Painting no. 4, 1961, oil on linen 60 1/8 x 60 1/4 in. (152.6 x 152.9 cm) Smithsonian American Art Museum. Gift of S.C. Johnson & Son, Inc. 1969. One of several "last" paintings painted by the artist

the European tradition. Concurring, Judd was happy to flush all that down the drain.

Rosalind Krauss, had pin-pointed 1966 as the year of the unravelling of modernism, when paintings no longer seemed capable of finishing within their frames. It had been her response to seeing Stella's *Wolfboro* series and Kenneth Noland's diamond-shaped paintings. Stella and Judd had fulfilled their mission in stiling up "The felt transparency between past and present, so that the image no longer contains the terms of its past." The ridding of compositional play within individual works of art may have had their *fait accompli* back then, but current indicators point to a burgeoning of the relational, something that may have started as considering one painting to another in an exhibition, but has now infecting every conceivable facet

of the business of making and selling art like a rapidly-spreading virus. With historical depth having flattened, art commenced its lateral march, not so much consuming entities that it encountered, but being consumed by them, the market perhaps being the most consequential. Not only had Duchamp played a leading part in propelling art in the direction that it ultimately took, but he seems to have foreseen art's inevitable marriage to money, a relationship, he hadn't quite approved of. In 1928, Duchamp had written Stieglitz, his New York dealer from Paris, "The feeling about the 'market' here is so disgusting that you never hear anymore of a thought for itself – Painters and Painting go up and down like Wall Street stock." It may be a time for the artist and the art critic alike to consider what Duchamp may have meant by "a thought for itself."