

Resisting the Dangerous Journey: The Crisis in Journalistic Criticism

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When an art critic learns that another art critic is going to make a public statement about art criticism,[1] the first response is likely to be not eagerness and curiosity but an irritated and slightly paranoid, Uh oh! Am I going to be attacked? Who is that critic to assume a position superior to mine? Who is he or she to make a claim for the special urgency or truth of his or her perspective? Since almost every critic feels some dissatisfaction all the time with the general state of art criticism but almost no critic discusses it except among friends, what right does any critic have to make his or her dissatisfaction known?

In the last few years this unofficial conspiracy of silence among critics about other critics has damaged the profession. It is not based on mutual respect and support but on self-protectiveness and laziness. It has discouraged an essential discussion of the responsibilities of critics to face issues, including the issue of criticism, and the consequences of not facing them. I believe that art criticism is failing miserably to meet the challenges of this time, and that art and artists, and indeed the artistic culture of this country, are suffering as a result. American art, artists and art institutions are struggling, and because so few critics have been willing to participate in this struggle and examine their role in its development and outcome, art criticism, as a whole, is in trouble.

It is not just the silence within the profession that distresses me but also the silence outside it. I made the decision to formulate a public statement about criticism last spring, at the end of yet another art season that featured an abysmal lack of critical vision and nerve and an unwillingness, almost across the art world board, to utter a peep of protest. I am sick of people saying in private what they will not say in public, or saying in private the opposite of what they say in public. Part of what I admire in the writings of a public intellectual like Henry Louis Gates Jr. is that there seems to be no real split between what he will say privately and publicly. The institutionalization of private outrage and public silence -- not just regarding criticism but also with regard to so much that matters to art and culture, including the now all-but-official hostility to art and demonization of the artist in America -- has historical associations that are very disturbing to me. So much public silence in the face of so much private unhappiness throughout the art world is a sign of a crisis of moral imagination that is one of the underlying themes of this presentation.

What compelled me to prepare this talk is not the entire field of art criticism. I am not going to discuss critical theory and cultural criticism. The far-ranging investigations of art in terms of race, gender and class need and receive their own forums. Analyses of and meditations on the definitions of art in a post-Cold War, post-Colonial world, of the roles art has played in the formation and development of American society and of other societies around the globe, and of the social and political values art and criticism have consciously or unwittingly supported, are invaluable. The investigation of the assumptions and implications behind the words we use and the art we defend and the forms in which our words appear is particularly useful now in a world changing with such startling speed. Look at South Africa, look at Jordan and Israel, look at Eastern Europe. Look at the women's, black and gay liberation movements within the United States. The views of art of many Americans were largely defined in a Cold War era that was governed by one or two points of view, a will, and indeed often the sense of an obligation, to impose that "good" point of view, and a belief, still obviously irresistible to many Americans, that civilization itself can survive only if one particular system of values is affirmed at home and abroad. The radical shifts we have been living through in perspective, possibility and power *have*

to affect the production and reception of art. Perhaps critical theorists and cultural critics can't help with this fundamental question: How do we deal with the wall between post- and pre-Freudians? In other words, how do people who take for granted that human beings are shaped by assumptions and attitudes of which they are unconscious when growing up, and who believe that freedom and morality depend on becoming aware of and transcending these assumptions and attitudes, negotiate relationships of justice and power with people for whom the unconscious does not exist? But with all the insularity of their language, and with all their sometimes alarming distance from, or indifference to, the concrete living process of making and experiencing art, critical theorists and cultural critics are doing a far better job considering the challenges of this time than the kind of criticism with which I am concerned here.

The field in crisis is journalistic art criticism. This is the one field of criticism that belongs to everyone and touches personally a broad cross section of curious and interested people. It also sets the tone for the way America thinks about art. Yet largely because of its identification with the impersonal and mysteriously powerful news media institutions in which it appears, it is also the one field of criticism that seems essentially untouchable and unaccountable. Its enormous influence is taken for granted, particularly among artists, curators and dealers in New York, yet general discussions about it rarely take place, and within the academic world only the most generous scholars treat it with respect. It may be both the most accessible and the most remote, the most wooed and the most spurned, field of criticism. I want this talk to suggest the value of studying journalistic criticism. I also want it to suggest the danger of continuing to exclude it from the essential theoretical and cultural conversations.

My focus here will be the art criticism that appears in daily or weekly large circulation national publications like *The New Yorker*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *New York* magazine and *The New York Times*. My concern here is with *national* not local publications, although many of the problems I will talk about are now endemic to the field. I have a great deal of admiration for local critics in New York and in other cities, some of whom have been writing with commitment and flair for a long time. But local critics have limited readerships, and most are responding to the needs of a very particular public. In addition, local critics write primarily reviews, and the review format has become too predictable, too formulaic, too safe, to make journalistic criticism effectively responsive to such an unpredictable, non-formulaic time.

No matter how good the work of local critics may be, criticism in national publications leads the field of journalistic criticism in a way that criticism in local publications can't. The *Times*, *The New Yorker* and *Time* have the greatest visibility, but critics for any number of national publications, including *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Los Angeles Times*, have the ability to move the field. The way an artist or a trend is written about in any of these publications, particularly the *Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Time* and *Newsweek*, can be taken by other newspapers and magazines not only in America but sometimes even abroad as a sign of the way that artist or trend deserves to be dealt with. One negative review in *The New York Times* made collectors cancel orders to buy an artist's paintings. Another made an institution halfway around the world think twice about taking the exhibition that was panned. A review I wrote for the *Times* on a public art project got waved around at a board meeting by the enraged director of a prominent cultural organization who did not like the project and who changed the organization's arts policy partly as a result of the visibility of my laudatory words.

Given their influence not only on art but also on the perception of art by people in power, what does it mean when the publications that have the ability to set the agenda for journalistic criticism reduce their art coverage and communicate little sense of mission in what they do cover? What is the effect on the field when the critics writing for these broad-based national publications, all of them with real strengths, some with impressive talent, seem to have almost no desire to engage the most pressing issues of their time and, in the process, to argue tirelessly that art is indispensable to the life of the spirit and to the forever unfinishable process of figuring out who Americans are individually and as a nation?

What happens when the criticism in these publications is almost entirely confined to reviews? Art reviews are indispensable. They are ways of recognizing and following artists, of keeping in touch with the changing ways artists think and of the ways artists, dealers, curators and collectors function, of bringing new institutions and alternative spaces to public attention and tracing their rise or fall. They are ways for critics to evolve new ways of defining and thinking by finding out where their areas of ignorance and blindness are and working on them. Reviews continue to be written with purpose and punch, but there are now too few of them for journalistic criticism to be sufficiently grounded in the processes and textures of art. And reviews alone can never be enough. Reviews cannot substitute for essays in which critics put ideas together and grapple with the currents and pressures of the moment. These essays are rarely written anymore. When the number of reviews diminishes, when the reviews that do appear tend to focus on established artists and entrenched institutions, and when almost every life-and-death artistic and cultural issue is denied or ducked, journalistic criticism begins to be experienced not as an attempt to explore and grapple with the challenges of contemporary art and life but as a way of avoiding them.

Look at the response to the crisis of the National Endowment for the Arts, which is far and away the most important artistic and cultural issue in America during the last five years. I believe strongly that the national journalistic critic's failure of vision and nerve in the face of the Endowment crisis goes to the heart of the current crisis of vision and nerve in journalistic criticism. The Endowment crisis is the one point of intersection for almost every major artistic cultural issue with which we are faced. It is there that the quality issue, issues of sexuality and race, the conflict between post- and pre-Freudians, and the predicaments of art institutions run together.

Who feels from the journalistic critic's coverage of this crisis that it is possible to figure out why the Endowment matters so much, what the implications of this crisis are, and what the changing role of the Endowment should or can be? In what publication have you seen an awareness of the number of first-rate small art organizations throughout this country that will die if the Endowment is bled to death or dismantled? Just where have critics been trying to come to terms with the radically changing nature of arts patronage and the effects this will have on the life of art in this country? The entire middle ground of funding, which was partially provided and in an essential way symbolized by the NEA, is dropping out. What is likely to remain is private patronage, supporting blue chip art, on one side, and foundation patronage, which is lining up behind art with an activist agenda, on the other. And where are the critics with the journalistic sense to immediately confront those controversial projects funded with small amounts of NEA money, like the Ron Athey performance in Minneapolis, and the "Art Rebate" project in San Diego, that have so much to tell us about art and culture now, and the complex relationship between art and the rest of society so many artists are now trying to understand?

If critics lived the Endowment drama, I might not be asking these questions: Who feels from reading journalistic art criticism that the problems of our art institutions and their relationship to diminishing economic resources, changing funding sources, and changing social realities have been sufficiently articulated that we can create a public dialogue about the future of art museums in America? Who, among journalistic critics, is trying to think through in public the cultural and esthetic consequences of the fundamental collision between art made by solitary artists inventing their own communities and worlds, and art made by artists determined to strengthen the traditions and authority of actual communities, many of them outside power? Which national journalistic critics consistently enter the terrain of art that makes them uncomfortable and write about it in ways that encourage emotional and intellectual risk?

I know very well the difficulties of being a journalistic critic. I know how hard it is to write seriously week in and week out for a mass-media publication. But I also know that the impossibility of journalistic criticism is proof of its necessity. I know as well that writing for a powerful newspaper or magazine with a general readership is an extraordinary privilege. And that before these regular writing positions are stepping stones to personal comfort and power, they are public trusts. I don't think readers look to newspaper and magazine critics for definitive answers.

What they have a right to expect is full engagement, and full respect for how much their words affect the situation of art in this country. I know, too, that no matter how hard any institution may make it for them to do their jobs as they may want to do them, critics are fully responsible for the work they produce, just as artists are fully responsible for their art, no matter what kinds of pressures critics, collectors and commercial galleries put upon them.

What makes it so difficult for me to watch journalistic criticism discredit itself is that it is irreplaceable. Critics writing for these general publications have a special, if not a unique, opportunity to respond to the immediacy of art and communicate the power images and objects have. A good wordsmith, like Robert Hughes of *Time*, John Russell of the *Times*, Peter Plagens of *Newsweek*, or Kay Larson, formerly with *New York* magazine, can paint a vivid picture of what it is like to be present when the work of an old or modern master, a Titian, a Poussin, a Manet, a Monet, a Picasso, a Brancusi, or of any of the first-rate contemporary painters and sculptors rooted in these traditions, begins to speak. Their writing can be beautifully concrete. While critical theorists and cultural critics have a tendency to respond more to the prevailing conventions of their discourses than to the living textures and personalities of art, journalistic critics can make their words quiver with the spark that makes a particular work of art live.

Journalistic critics can perform a great service by locating and preserving the delicate relationship between art and language that is one of the core issues of my life. As an intellectual, I believe that nothing can be allowed to be off limits to the most rigorous analysis. As soon as you place any response or assumption beyond analysis, or allow any subject, even one that has to do with religious faith, to be immune to critical intelligence, you allow it to become a taboo around which all sorts of fears and prejudices eventually stick and breed. But I also respect faith. And I understand in my bones the limits of analytical language and the ways it can resist, if not betray, the multilayered concreteness of experience. I hope I will always defend the most fearless questioning, but I also understand the words of Helena Luczywo, the co-editor of the Polish newspaper *Gazeta Wyborcza*, in Eva Hoffman's book *Exit Into History*. "I don't believe in this American system of endlessly talking about everything," she said. "That's not what it's about, anyway." [2] I respect both the side of contemporary art that is struggling to bring centuries of assumptions and bias to the surface, and I respect the side of contemporary art that is struggling to communicate an experience that remains stubbornly resistant to words. I feel the power of words both when they name the unnamable, and when they hold within them the revelation of a mystery beyond language.

Two of the writers who left a permanent mark on me in the 60's were James Baldwin and Joan Didion. Their prose in *Notes of a Native Son*, "The Fire Next Time" and *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* had an intense immediacy for me, and a rhythm that rolled their ideas through my head in such a prophetic way that that they are circulating there still. A number of their essays first appeared in journalistic publications. I read Baldwin's "Fire Next Time" in *The New Yorker*. Didion has been as comfortable in *The New York Times Magazine* and *Book Review* as she has in *The New York Review of Books*. Their essays continue to be reminders for me of how the pressures and timeliness of journalism can inspire physical, insight-filled, nearly indestructible prose that looks at reality with unblinking poetic eyes.

At the same time that I first read Didion, I saw on the back cover of a book of Chekhov stories a statement I've never forgotten. It said that in his stories Chekhov held life, like a fluttering bird, in the cup of his hand. Substitute art for life and language for the hand and you will have a sense how precious the relationship between art and language can be for me. If the hand does not make the bird feel welcome, it will fly away; if the hand squeezes the bird too tightly, it will smother. Even if the hand does make the bird welcome, it will eventually leave, but its imprint, the sensation of what it felt like, will be written into that hand forever. The kind of writer who loves art and encounters actual objects every week has a better chance of sustaining this privileged partnership between art and language than someone whose experience of art is largely mediated by books and slides.

Journalistic critics can do much more than keep a respect for the vividness and concreteness of aesthetic experience alive. Because they are writing for publications that reach out to a general audience, they have an opportunity to build bridges not only across many regions within the art world but also between the art world and the worlds outside it. In a fragmented society in which the tendency is to divide and subdivide and subdivide again, critics who have the opportunity to write about many kinds of art, from many cultures, can make their columns platforms on which many different people can meet. Journalistic criticism can demonstrate the importance of crossover critics who can suggest the kinds of exchanges that are possible among different people, and the kinds of insight an exploration of any one culture can bring to the understanding of others.

In addition, journalistic critics can have a real effect. For many people outside the art world, mass-media publications are the only sources of information about art and artists. Critics writing for these publications can therefore affect the national experience of art in a way critics writing for specialized publications can't. If an article in an academic publication like *October* or *Critical Inquiry* or *Representations* considered one of the great issues of the day, for example, the plight of the NEA, it would be read only by an influential but very small readership, and it would take a long time, if ever, for its insights to filter down to the general public. If, on the other hand, an analysis of the NEA appeared in *The New York Times* or *The New Yorker*, there is a very good chance that most of the essential players -- from artists to politicians to members of the National Council for the Arts, the board that governs the Endowment -- would pay immediate attention.

If you think I am expecting too much of art journalism, please remember that Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg and Thomas Hess, the three major forces in establishing art criticism as a serious enterprise in the United States, all established and sustained their voices in journalistic publications. They were passionate and articulate writers who had no trouble expressing themselves in *The Nation*, *The New Yorker* or *New York* magazine.[3] The fact that their words appeared on these pages was essential to the legitimization of American art and to the expectation of engaged criticism many people still bring to the publications they wrote for. No matter how threatened by introspection and ideas mass-media publications may now be, the responsiveness of these three critics to the excitement and challenges of art -- and their awareness of what art and criticism need to do at any given moment to prove themselves worthy of national attention and respect -- can remain a model for the seriousness and commitment with which journalistic critics should proceed.

In short, journalistic criticism has an essential role to play in the artistic and cultural life of America. When it is as disengaged and self-absorbed as it is now, the entire artistic enterprise is weakened. Fewer artists, dealers, museums and alternative spaces are supported. Issues are not brought into the open, where a public conversation about them can take place, but allowed to fester. Suspicion of art and criticism of the kind that has been unmistakable in government and on *60 Minutes* and in the Magazine and News of the Week in Review sections of *The New York Times* snowballs.

It is not my purpose here to explore all the reasons for the crisis in journalistic criticism, but I will mention a few. Certainly in a country in which social prestige and journalistic space can be largely determined by economic success, the weakening of the art market in the late 1980's is a factor. Less money lavished on art means less respect and space for it in daily and weekly publications. It is also important to recognize that mass-media institutions are increasingly run by men and women groomed on the glitz and glamour of the 80's who are insensitive to the difference between real and ersatz culture, and who think of art and criticism, and indeed probably of all cultural pursuits, not as a calling but as a career. Obliteration of cultural memory is seen as indispensable to hipness. No one running any national mass-media publication seems to have any knowledge of, or interest in, how recent the success of art in America has been and how fragile the situation of the artist in America is. My father was a modernist painter. I was brought up in the 1940's and early 50's, when to be an unconventional artist in America was to be a nonperson. No one should forget that at that point, just after World War II, American modernism was barely appreciated, and hardly a single American painter was known abroad. In the 1950's, the situation

changed, in part because of the economic boom, in part because the government began to see a way to use adventurous art as a Cold War weapon. In the 1960's, the National Endowment for the Arts formalized government support and the American artist became a star in the international cultural arena. No one should ever take the place of the artist in America for granted. It has to be thought and rethought constantly. It has to be fought for again and again and again. It would be extremely unfortunate if this fight ceased to be part of the journalistic critic's job, and privilege.

In considering the current situation of journalistic criticism, it is also worth noting that not one of the critics writing for a national publication wants to be known exclusively as an art critic. Peter Plagens of *Newsweek* is a painter. Mark Stevens, who took over as the art critic of *New York* magazine in the spring of 1994, is also a novelist. Robert Hughes of *Time* has written significant books on non-art subjects, almost all his ambitious articles appear outside *Time*, and for a good while now his primary energy has gone into a television series on the history of art in America. Michael Kimmelman came to *The New York Times* as a full-time music and part-time architecture critic and has been writing regularly on music for *Vogue*. Adam Gopnik of *The New Yorker* has made it clear that he wants to be known as a man of letters. Among these critics, only Plagens feels that the messy, uncertain, conflicted arena of contemporary art is not something foreign, something other, but his world. In not one of these critics is there now the full commitment to being an art critic that the current challenges of art criticism demand.

It is also important to recognize that facing these challenges can put critics in difficult positions. Art criticism was defined as a subject of significant concern in national magazines and newspapers during a postwar modernist era that assumed that a critic from one viewpoint could effectively evaluate all art, and that making judgments was the primary purpose of the critic. The review format was designed for coverage of the monographic exhibition, or of the group exhibition with one theme. When I think of the journalistic format, I think of a review of van Gogh, or Lucian Freud, or Impressionism. I think first of all of painting, in other words of a medium on the wall so familiar that the public assumes it can be taken in quickly, from one point of view, directly in front of it, like a reader scanning a newspaper, or a viewer absorbing a few seconds or minutes of entertainment on the television screen. I also think of a characterization of an artist or a body of work, or a commentary on an exhibition's point of view, or an evaluation of historical influence and ultimate achievement. The format and procedures of journalistic criticism are highly conventionalized. The critic writes in an authoritative tone, on a subject assumed by institutional consensus to be worthy of his or her attention, and the institutions of the publication, the museum, and the journalistic critic are strengthened as a result. A review may be misguided or superb; and an eloquent review can be so sharp or give so much pleasure that it may be unforgettable. My point is that for a long time, the form of the review, the subject of the review, and the needs of the news institution to attend to culture while reinforcing its own authority, appeared to be a seamless fit.

But as much pleasure and insight as painting now gives and will always give, and as much as it must always be critically supported, this is not a painting moment. This has been the decade of the exhibition designed to resist, if not blow up, institutional boxes and categories and conventions and to question prevailing systems of power. The decade began for me with *Magicians of the Earth*, a huge blockbuster show in Paris in 1989 that brought together contemporary art from all over the world, very little of it painting. Art from Asia, Australia, Africa and the South Pacific was shown in the same spaces as art from Europe and the United States. Although the exhibition was trashed by many critics, including me, I have never forgotten it. Its global perspective, its ability to suggest the eloquence of many different artistic cultures and the many differing definitions of art around the world, changed the artistic landscape. *Magicians of the Earth* made me more seriously aware of multiple esthetic standards. It also began to make me aware of the potential gap between the conventional standards for evaluating exhibitions and these exhibitions' actual importance. This was a show filled with problems, but you *had* to think about it. It could be picked apart on so many levels, but it changed the way a great many people thought about exhibitions and art.

To this point, the 90's has been the decade of the unreviewable show. *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980's* opened in the spring of 1990 at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art and the Studio Museum in Harlem. It, too, was in many ways a mess, and it, too, changed the artistic landscape. It included many artists from non-European backgrounds. It asked questions about what was marginal and what was mainstream, and whether one set of standards could do justice to all the artistic traditions in America. Much of the art obliged visitors to take into account social and political realities that had been essentially excluded from museum exhibitions. Like *Magicians of the Earth*, *The Decade Show* took many people out of their comfort zones, making them aware that they were operating from the perspective of someone who was white or black, Asian or Latino, male or female, gay or straight, and that this perspective inevitably shaped the way art was perceived.

Catalogues reflect the purposes and polemics of these kinds of shows. No longer is a catalogue invariably the expression of one voice talking about one discipline. Now it may include many voices, from many disciplines. A journalistic critic can feel, rightly or wrongly, that he or she can arrive at some control over a retrospective of paintings by Jasper Johns or Cy Twombly. But how, in a single review, written under deadline, usually within a day or two of seeing the exhibition, can you feel you can arrive at a sense of control over *The Decade Show* or the *1993 Whitney Biennial*, no matter how balanced and professional the review may be? In a review format that was designed to reinforce the authority of one voice, writing essentially about one medium, how do critics consider exhibitions that argue for multiple voices, and for the need to analyze the mechanisms of institutional authority?

How, within a newspaper or weekly magazine format, do you write about *Culture in Action*, an example of the kind of thinking that is redefining public art? Organized by Mary Jane Jacob -- whose retrospectives of Gordon Matta-Clark (in the late 70's), Magdalena Abakanowicz and Jannis Kounellis (in the early 80's) and *Places With a Past: New Site-Specific Art in Charleston* (in 1991) helped establish her as one of the most original and prophetic curators in the country -- this *Culture in Action* was a program of 8 community-based, site-specific art projects in Chicago in 1993. Two Los Angeles artists, Daniel J. Martinez and VinZula Kara, organized a parade through Mexican-American and African-American neighborhoods not far from downtown Chicago that had never been sites of parades. The festival of around 500 people, mostly young, most of them from communities that normally have little to do with one another, also marched along Maxwell Street, the heart of a thriving tertiary market with a dramatic and important immigrant and labor history, now run primarily by Mexican-Americans and African-Americans. One of the purposes of the collaborative spectacle was to call attention to Maxwell Street's vulnerability to the expansion plans of the nearby University of Illinois.

Another artist, Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle, worked for months with teen-agers, mostly Latino, who live in and around his Westtown neighborhood. Much of the work he did with them focused on videos and the role of television in the formation of societal assumptions and roles. He helped them prepare video presentations about themselves and their neighborhoods. At a late afternoon and evening block party at the end of August, around 70 of these videos were installed on steps, in doorways, on the street, in a car. The videos were the focus of a visually haunting street festival at which insiders and outsiders were welcome and gang members cooperated with rival gang members to insure everyone's safety.

How does a journalistic critic write about this in a review format? To fly to Chicago, spend two or three hours there, then fly back and write an authoritative piece on a program that was on one level a challenge to the look-and-run nature of the journalistic experience, is extraordinarily difficult. You can't just *look* at this kind of art and move on. To *look* at a de Kooning show and write about it is appropriate; de Kooning painted asphalt webs and city-smart fields that were made to be explored with the eye. But to go into a Chicago neighborhood like Westtown, look at the people in the neighborhood, and write about them for a corporate institution that may have had little interest in the realities of their lives, can be an act of violence. These are people outside power who belong to groups that have largely been treated as objects within American media culture.

One of the aims of Manglano-Ovalle's project was to de-objectify them, in part by introducing outsiders to the complexity of their lives, in part by giving them the media literacy and equipment to allow them to create their own images of themselves. In half a day of running from project to project, it is very hard even to ask the right questions. You certainly can't begin to come to terms with such essential questions as, Who is *Culture in Action* for and why? Who is art for? Why are more and more artists interested in this kind of community-based art? What does this kind of art have to offer, and what determines whether a community-based project succeeds or fails?

How did journalistic critics deal with *Culture in Action*? Essentially they didn't. With the notable exception of Michael Kimmelman, they avoided it. And even if Kimmelman did not write about the project until it was nearly over, he made the trip and got the project into the newspaper of record in such a way as to let an essential audience know that a vital conversation about public art, and about the meanings of "public" and "art," exists. That's a lot.

Where journalistic critics have traditionally had the most trouble is precisely in those areas where categories blur or borders are crossed, which happen to be the areas in which some of the most important art and thinking of this decade is taking place. The 1990's are full of projects that challenge traditional definitions of art. That challenge traditional art boundaries. That make it hard to say, this and only this is what art is, here and only here is *where* it is. That anger many people in the art world who react viscerally just to the mention of something like *Culture in Action*, vilifying it as trendy and political, unrelated to anything that has to do with art.

I want to give you an example of the kind of art with which daily and weekly journalism has the most serious trouble. In 1993, David Avalos, Elizabeth Sisco and Louis Hock, three artists in San Diego, conceived a performance piece called "Arte-Reembolso/Art Rebate." It included giving fresh \$10 bills to 450 illegal aliens who had crossed the border into the United States. The \$5,000 for the piece was provided by San Diego's Museum of Contemporary Art, a mainstream museum, and the Centro Cultural de la Raza, a community arts center, as part of their collaborative exhibition *La Frontera/The Border*. It included more than 30 artists, some as well known as Terry Allen and Luis Jimenez, who have lived along the nearly 2,000-mile Mexican-American border and whose work is partly or wholly inspired by its collision of cultures and ideas. Because one-third of the funding for *La Frontera* was provided by the National Endowment for the Arts, giving money to illegal aliens was explosive. In his front-page article on "Art Rebate" in *The New York Times*, Seth Mydans spoke with the artists; he quoted Congressman Randy (Duke) Cunningham of San Diego, who said: "I can hardly imagine a more contemptuous use of taxpayers' hard-earned dollars," and he spoke with officials of the Endowment, which, as a result of the project, was yet again under siege.[4] Many people reading about the project were furious. Such a piece always triggers the reactions: What does this have to do with art? It's nothing but a cut-and-dried, self-serving political act. I remember saying to myself when I read Mydans's article, "Damn it! Why do a project like that now, when the Endowment is so vulnerable," but I reserved judgment because I know very well that this is precisely the kind of work that is never reported in a way that makes it possible to really understand it. Three days after the first Mydans article, the *Times* produced a Sunday editorial that characterized the three artists as "loonies." [5]

Let me comment a bit about the piece and its implications. (1) As many of you know, the Mexican-American border can have a stark, often nightmarish, sometimes hallucinatory reality. As some of you are aware, the border has also become a concept that is crucial to the art of this time. Borders are bitterly contested all over the world, including the Middle East and Eastern Europe. The authority and permeability of borders between classes, between races, between neighborhoods, between the post-industrial and pre-industrial worlds, is an essential issue of contemporary life. The Mexican-American border is now both an actual region and a symbol through which many people believe it is possible to experience and visualize the kinds of hybrid identities and creations emerging from border conflicts and collisions. By the vehemence of the responses it evoked, and by the sharp difference in the responses of Chicanos and whites, "Art Rebate" underlined both the urgency of the real situation the exhibition *La Frontera* was trying to deal with, and the importance of the border as symbol. (2) Avalos, Sisco and Hock wanted to

make a statement about the ambiguous and complex situation many illegal aliens, or undocumented workers, are in. They pay sales tax on almost everything they buy in the United States, and for a long time they have enabled many people to get valuable labor for low wages without paying taxes, but they have no rights. They have been an important part of the California economy, and do a lot of work no one else there will do, but when the state needs a scapegoat, they are it. By giving a few hundred people a "tax rebate" of \$10 that was clearly symbolic but also just enough to be significant, the artists helped call attention not only to the plight of illegal aliens but to an extremely ambiguous and complex *American* situation. (3) For many Chicanos, the idea of being alien in the southwestern United States is impossible to accept. They know that this part of the country belonged to Mexico until 1848. A recent poster by Yolanda Lopez, a Chicano artist whose work I first saw in *The Decade Show*, shows a man in an Aztec headdress pointing out at us like Uncle Sam and saying, "Who's the illegal alien, *Pilgrim?*"(4) Letters about the project kept appearing for weeks in the San Diego papers. Many defined for Chicanos what Americans thought of them. "They hate us," one Chicano art professional said to me. Last November Proposition 187 passed in California. It institutionalized the vehement reaction brought to the surface in "Art Rebate." The proposition calls for ending education and health services to the children of illegal aliens. These services are seen as a serious drain on the fragile economy of California by many people in the state who are not anti-Chicano, including many African-Americans and legal immigrants. (5) The "Art Rebate" artists wonder why so many Americans complain about tiny amounts of taxpayer money given to a handful of controversial art projects while so few Americans voice outrage about vast amounts of taxpayer money wasted. Where, they wonder, is the righteous indignation about the savings and loan scandal and the billions of taxpayer dollars needed to deal with it?

However anyone may analyze "Art Rebate," and big questions can be raised about it, I think you will agree with me that Avalos, Sisco and Hock are not loonies. Would the *Times* use this word on its editorial page to describe serious people in any other profession?

What does "Art Rebate" have to do with art? For one thing, it increases the immediacy of *La Frontera* by letting everyone know artists making work about the Mexican-American border can be playing for high stakes. The piece has that sense of necessity, that rootedness in life-and-death issues, that characterizes much of the art that deserves attention. For another thing, the piece seems so logical and yet so unexpected that it suggests the kind of artistic imagination that can shed light on anything it touches. Finally, it creates an esthetic space in the mind, in my mind anyway, where artists, politicians, north and south, United States and Mexico, the media and art, run together. That space will remain active in me for some time.

Now I want to give you an example of how hard and fast categories and borders are in newspapers and magazines. On Aug. 25, 1992, *New York Times* music critic Allan Kozinn wrote a review of "The World of Richard Strauss," a two-weekend festival at Bard College that included an exploration of Strauss's connections with Nazism. Kozinn wrote of "pictures of Strauss and Goebbels beaming at each other, and Strauss conducting beneath a swastika banner. More broadly, the exhibition's posters vilify composers whose music, in the Nazis' view, did not represent pure German values and would corrupt the morals of children. Music lovers are exhorted to reject these dangerous currents and protest against them." Then Kozinn wrote this: "A visitor taking in the exhibition just two days after the Republican National Convention could not help but notice a similarity between this rhetoric and that of the American right wing. Such a comparison was clearly intended: An adjacent exhibition presented 15 prints by Robert Mapplethorpe, the photographer whose work was a focus of the conservative attack on the National Endowment for the Arts." [6]

The next day, an editors' note appeared in the paper. It said this: "A music review yesterday described "The World of Richard Strauss," a music festival at Bard College, which included a recreation of a 1938 exhibition of Nazi propaganda against 'degenerate,' modern music. The review said there was a similarity between such propaganda and some views expressed at the Republican

National Convention this month. Such an offensive comparison was out of place in a music review." [7]

This editor's note crystallized for me a number of attitudes shaping the *Times's* cultural coverage. One was that critics should stay in their corners. The second was that the culture section had become essentially an adornment for the most important, the only *real* parts of the paper, the hard news sections. It is there and only there that life-and-death issues can be dealt with. In most mass-media publications, there is a clear frame around columns of criticism, and critics must be careful not to trespass outside it. The note also drove home to me that within the most powerful mass-media institutions, individualism and independence are welcome only within strict limits. Without room for individualism and independence to breathe fully, how much room can there be for the imagination?

Clearly then, if a critic approaches "Art Rebate," or *Culture in Action*, or *The Decade Show*, or the 1993 *Whitney Biennial*, with a curiosity and willingness to suspend judgment until the art has revealed what it has to offer, and then writes about it in a reflective and questioning manner, the criticism may challenge institutional frameworks and, by implication, institutional thinking. And this may put the critic at risk within the institution. Given the anger in that *Times* editor's note, wariness about confronting some of the most serious and interesting art of the 90's in any large corporate institution is understandable.

But critics must ask themselves these questions: If I don't push the envelope and find some way to reinvent my profession so that it can continue to do justice to the issues shaping the art of my time, what am I doing? Am I doing my job? What effect will my lack of vision and nerve have on the attitude toward art and artists, criticism and critics, in this country? And what effect will my lack of vision and nerve have on the vitality of the institution I work for? Are critics really serving their institutions, or art criticism, not to speak of contemporary art, through unwavering obedience to institutional expectations that might be inappropriate, if not anachronistic?

I am definitely not saying a critic should consider a stupid and futile attempt to overturn his or her institution. I do think that if critics really love their institutions and believe in themselves, and see writing about art not as a career but as a calling, they will know they have to keep struggling to make their institutions dynamic. This cannot be done by hiding behind the institution. Nor can it be done without making peace with the kind of uncertainty so many journalistic institutions consider a curse. The one response that is impermissible on the network news is doubt; permission to doubt is one of the great gifts of modernism to 20th-century culture. Critics must be willing from time to time not only to wiggle their toes in issues that threaten them, or for which they have no answer, but to plunge into them and learn to swim there. It is impossible at any time for critics who write regularly to avoid mistakes. Making them and being attacked for them mean little or nothing in themselves. What matters is the way critics deal with these mistakes and attacks. What matters is the quality of curiosity, the quality of attentiveness, the quality of concern, the quality of vision, the quality of the experience of art and language. It is also the quality of debate a critic makes available. If the discussions provoked by a critic are at the expense of that critic, so be it. If I say something that unwittingly brings to the surface esthetic or cultural or racial limitations, and my words enable people to become more aware of those limitations, fine. Probably everyone here has a sense of the kind of critic needed to meet the challenges of this moment. Many approaches are, of course, possible. Many different approaches are needed. I am looking for critics who not only love art -- not just one kind of art, art -- but who also love language, and who are also able to keep learning and growing from their mistakes, and from the dialogues they establish with and among their readers and within themselves.

I am also looking for critics whose imaginations let them know that they must reach out not only to art that responds to their taste but also to art that makes them afraid and to issues for which they have no answer. The best scholars, scientists, poets and artists -- the best people in any field -- know that anytime you take on again and again and again an issue you felt you had no idea how to deal with until you begin to learn to deal with it, you change, you evolve, you grow, you set an

example to those around you of the way knowledge and transformation happen. In one of the parables in his bleak, lush, grand novel *The Crossing*, Cormac McCarthy writes: "as has been the case with many a philosopher that which at first seemed an insurmountable objection to his theories became gradually to be seen as a necessary component to them and finally the centerpiece itself." [8] The Russian poet Marina Tsvetayeva said: "Don't forget that the apparent impossibility of something is the first sign of its naturalness - in a different world, naturally." [9] Well, we live in a different world every day, even in our familiar world, and the world that awaits us at the dawn of the next millennium will have been unimaginable from the perspective of someone who thought he or she knew what the world was like in 1968 or even 1989, when the Iron Curtain collapsed.

So criticism for me is not a position, but a way of being. It is a way of encountering and being encountered, a way of testing and being tested, a way of feeling blind and beginning to see, a way of learning to work with the knowledge that anxiety can be both your worst enemy and your truest friend, a way of being true to the past and open to the present and future, of being true to the past *by* being open to the present and future. Just as the measure of artists can be taken by their ability to struggle with problems that surface within their work, so the measure of critics can ultimately be taken by their ability to struggle with issues and ideas that at one time they had no idea how to deal with. Good artists may put something out in public they have not resolved, but they do not lie to themselves about it. They always know what they did not do and did not get, and they will not rest until they have dealt with what they left unresolved. Why should critics be different? Why should critics have more permission than artists to fool themselves? If critics know they didn't get something, or if they know they wrote something that exposed them to their own insecurity or ignorance, they had better, sooner or later, perhaps even much later if need be, deal with it.

During the last few minutes of this talk, I want briefly to zero in on the consequences of failing to deal with the crisis of the National Endowment for the Arts. Although there are a number of critics in New York and around the country, like Amei Wallach of *Newsday*, who have made responsible attempts to cover this issue, it is this sustained silence of the national journalistic critic, more than any other factor, that provoked this talk. The place of art and the artist in America cannot be understood apart from the Endowment issue. The Endowment issue is essential to understanding what America is willing to think about now, and the kind of discussion that is or is not possible in America. No matter how you cut it, the Endowment is a measure of our artistic and cultural resolve as a nation.

Journalistic critics could have done a great deal to help direct the debate. To me, the quality or sexuality or provocative nature of the photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe or Andres Serrano, which triggered the Congressional tirades on the floor of the House, or the drawings and performances of Karen Finley, were never the issue. Nor was it censorship, or the right of politicians and the public to protest the way public monies are spent.

The issue, to me, is whether we, as a nation - our government, our businesses, our news media, our educational institutions, our people - are now capable of nourishing the creative imagination, and if not, what that means. If the Endowment is still going to be our national agency dedicated to enabling the creative imagination in America to flourish, then artists like Mapplethorpe, Serrano, Finley, the performance artist Ron Athey, and the late gay black filmmaker Marlon Riggs, *have* to be funded, whether you, I, or mainstream America, likes their work or not. From the beginnings of modernism, artists have legitimized themselves and validated the entire artistic enterprise by finding ways to call attention to and in some instances deal with the dramas and conflicts of their time. From Impressionism to Cubism, to Surrealism, to Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism, artists have been locating the fault lines and questioning the taboos of their societies. If our national arts agency does not provide some funding for the kind of art that can pressure people to face the most pressing issues of their time, it is not being depoliticized. It is being emasculated. And America is demonstrating to the rest of the world that it does not have the confidence in itself to allow the creative imagination to go freely where it has to go and thrive.

There were two key moments that journalistic critics had to deal with. The first, in 1989, when the controversy hit, produced a good deal of writing. The second was in October 1993 when Jane Alexander took over as NEA chairman. This time there was little critical commentary in national publications. In the months leading up to her appointment, journalistic critics should have been writing about the Endowment constantly. If their thoughts about it were unresolved, they should have struggled with them in public. If they were against the Endowment, they should have said so and why. If they believed in it, they should have initiated a dialogue with Alexander and with Congress and the Administration, offering thoughts as to what the Endowment could be and how it could carry on. Perhaps even formulating a program statement suggesting the ways in which decisions to fund difficult and provocative art could be defended given the Endowment's mission. The Endowment may well not survive even with the press on its side, but it has no chance to survive in a viable form without its active and ongoing concern. That concern has not existed.

In terms of the state of criticism as well as in terms of the state of the Endowment, the consequences of the journalistic failure to respond to this challenge are far-reaching. Time and again, the crisis put critics where they seldom are, on the national stage. It gave them a national platform, and almost all of them refused it. The influence of Robert Hughes and Hilton Kramer outside the art world has a lot to do with their grasp of the importance of this kind of opportunity and their ability to express ideas and opinions that make people feel they are not backing down from the challenges of their time. If critics do not grab this kind of opportunity when it presents itself, they will not be at the same place they were at before. Their place in society will be lower. The patronizing article aimed at critical jargon on the front page of *The New York Times* News of the Week in Review section on Oct. 30, 1994, is a sign of the current lack of respect for art criticism across the journalistic board. In my opinion, every journalistic critic who has avoided the Endowment issue has been compromised as a result. I also believe that the entire field of art criticism has paid a price for the lack of vision and nerve of national journalistic critics fleeing the Endowment challenge. I think it will take years for art criticism, as a whole, to recover from it. The Endowment crisis, and the response to it in journalistic criticism, should become a textbook for future generations of critics looking to define the critic's job.

Before closing, I want to cite a passage by James Baldwin. While living in France and talking to his biographer David Leeming about what it would mean for him to avoid going back to America, he made a remark that is good advice for critics. "I've always felt that I had no real choice about the journey," Baldwin said. "In a way I learned about it in the streets. If you're frightened of something in the streets you walk towards it. Turn your back and they've got you." [10]

I want the last word here to go to Toni Morrison, whose short book of essays, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, was very much on my mind when I began thinking about this talk last summer. Morrison believes in the necessity for artists to go where their imaginations lead them. When they do follow their imaginations, which have their own needs and wills, they may enter unexplored land, and as they write their way through it they may locate and define areas within a culture that were silent or invisible before. In the course of her discussions of Poe and Hemingway and other American writers, she raises the absolutely crucial question of the link between the creative imagination and moral courage, a link that now demands our fullest attention. She ends her first essay articulating the racial assumptions responsible for the irresolutions in Willa Cather's last novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. She talks about Cather's "valiant effort at honest engagement" [11] and praises her courage to enter a territory she could not yet chart. "In her last novel," Morrison writes, Cather "works out and toward the meaning of female betrayal as it faces the void of racism. She may not have arrived safely, like Nancy, but to her credit she did undertake the dangerous journey." There is respect and perhaps even love in the words "to her credit she did undertake the dangerous journey." [12] I am sure there are critics out there for whom these words can become the critic's guide.

April 1995

Notes

1. This paper began as the public lecture for the Doris Sloan Memorial Education Symposium at the University of Michigan Museum of Art, Ann Arbor, November 12, 1994. It was delivered again at Brandeis University, November 15, 1994. It was worked into its present form for a lecture at the New York Studio School of Painting and Sculpture, January 4, 1995.
2. Eva Hoffman, *Exit into History*, Viking Penguin (New York, 1993), p. 42.
3. Obviously *The Nation* occupies a very different place now than it did 40 or 50 years ago, before the explosion of publications on artistic, literary or political culture, but it still has influence. Its current art critic, Arthur Danto, is the only critic writing for a national journalistic publication who is entirely comfortable with ideas. He has a curiosity rare in journalism and entertains artistic possibilities other journalistic critics turn their backs on. He is not interested in urgent engagement or in commanding attention. Could the art critic for this kind of weekly publication once again put pressure on the field? I don't see why not.
4. Seth Mydans, "Art Dollars for Me, \$10 for You, \$10 for You," *The New York Times*, August 12, 1993, Section A, p. 1.
5. "Watch This Intellectual Space," editorial in *The New York Times*, August 15, 1993, Section 4, p. 14.
6. Allan Kozinn, "The World of Richard Strauss, Murky and Not So Honorable," *The New York Times*, August 25, 1992, Section C, p. 13.
7. Editors' Note, *The New York Times*, August 26, 1992, Section A, p. 2.
8. Cormac McCarthy, *The Crossing*, Alfred A. Knopf (New York, 1994), p. 154.
9. Boris Pasternak, Marina Tsvetayeva and Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters: Summer 1926*, edited by Yevgeny Pasternak, Yelena Pasternak and Konstantin M. Azadovsky, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich (San Diego, New York, London), 1985, p. 30.
10. David Leeming, *James Baldwin*, Alfred A. Knopf (New York, 1994), p. 256.
11. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Vintage (New York, 1993), p. 19.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

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