

Art criticism is spurned by universities, but widely produced and read. It is seldom theorized, and its history has hardly been investigated. *The State of Art Criticism* presents an international conversation among art historians and critics that considers the relation between criticism and art history, and poses the question of whether criticism may become a university subject. Participants include Dave Hickey, James Panetta, Stephen Melville, Lynne Cook, Michael Newman, Whitney Davis, Ian Rogoff, Guy Brett, and Boris Groys.

**JAMES ELKINS** is E.C. Chadbourne Chair in the Department of Art History, Theory, and Criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. His many books include *Pictures and Tears*, *How to Use Your Eyes*, and *What Painting Is*, all published by Routledge.

**MICHAEL NEWMAN** teaches in the Department of Art History, Theory, and Criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and is Professor of Art Writing at Goldsmiths College in the University of London. His publications include the books *Richard Prince: Untitled (couple)* and *Jeff Wall*, and he is co-editor with Jon Bird of *Rewriting Conceptual Art*.

#### THE ART SEMINAR

Volume 4 in a book series from Routledge and the University College Cork

Cover design: Mark Lerner  
Cover image: © CORBIS

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
www.routledge.com

Printed in the U.S.A.

ISBN 0-415-97787-8



9 780415 977876

an informa business

EDITED BY  
**JAMES ELKINS AND  
MICHAEL NEWMAN**

# The State of Art Criticism

Sheila Farr

*Art Criticism: Who's Listening?*

Audience is key to any discussion of art criticism, and got surprisingly little attention in the roundtables. Who are we writing for? Why should they care? The standard complaint about academic writing—whether it's categorized as history or literature—at much of it seems to be aimed at other academics. Journalists have a more diverse audience and the opportunity to entice those who know little about the subject while prodding the assumptions of those who do. Just because the opportunity is there, of course, doesn't mean we always take it.

I'm a daily newspaper critic, which some of the panelists consider an oxymoron. That's okay: I'm ambivalent about the title, too. Clearly much of the reporting (and even investigative reporting) I end up doing in my role as the visual art critic for the *Seattle Times* has nothing to do with critical writing. But those of us who write about art for newspapers are a diverse bunch. With a background in visual art, dance, literature, and poetry—not journalism—I never intended to write for a daily paper. But I love the opportunities and the audience it presents me, even if the drop-dead pace and hit-and-run style don't suit my temperament.

My first exposure to arts writing, growing up in the 1960s, was reading Tom Robbins. Before his debut novel *Another Roadside Attraction*, Tom was the art critic for the *Seattle Times*. Much like Dave Hickey, he wrote reviews with slam-dunk judgments and dazzling prose that were always fun to read and deeply intriguing, even if



you couldn't figure out where those snappy judgments came from. (Tom once made headlines himself, arrested for indecent exposure at a Happening. It stuck in my mind then that a person must be fearless to be an art critic—and I've since learned from personal experience that it's true!)

I enjoyed working through transcripts of the roundtable discussions, dictionary at hand, even though at times it was a tough go. And naturally, being a critic, I'm glad to offer my assessment. First, Jim Elkins deserves applause for initiating the discussion and herding the cats. It's good to step back and take a hard look at what we do so fervently every day. The most focused part of the discussion dealt with the question of how history and criticism overlap. When it came to issues of contemporary criticism—should it describe or judge? What is its relationship to commerce? Should it be taught at universities?—the debate got more convoluted and tangential.

By the end, criticism was starting to look like a solipsistic endeavor, all wrapped up in itself. I couldn't help wondering, how are we serving art? (By that I don't mean gallery owners, publicists, artists, art collectors, and curators.) And how are we serving our readers?

If my early reading convinced me that art criticism can be engaging and even exhilarating, I've since developed my own ideas about its function. Here are some of them:

1. One of the greatest powers and responsibilities of a critic is choosing what to write about and what to exclude. In this respect, art historians are definitely critics when it comes to canon formation, no way around it.
2. Description isn't art criticism but it plays an important role, both in helping a reader picture the work in question and in helping the critic reveal the work's effectiveness. It's not a question of whether to describe or judge, rather how to present visual art in verbal terms.
3. Evaluation is essential to art criticism. Judgment is not. I agree with Michael Newman, who pointed out in the second roundtable that the act of weighing, comparing, contrasting, contextualizing needs to happen before a thumbs-up or -down. The most profound critical writing sometimes leaves

open questions. Our aesthetic should always be stretching. History has made lots of snap judgments look pretty silly.

4. Context matters—the framework of art history and contemporary culture, and the context in which the work is shown.

Readers come first in all this because writing is an act of communication. If art criticism isn't clear enough so that people understand it and compelling enough so they want to read it, we are writing to ourselves. It's our job to be interesting and relevant. That way, there's a chance of prying

Which is how we serve art. If a critic can inspire people to go look at art—be it a landscape painting, a multi-media video installation, an incendiary performance, or a sculpture made out of petroleum jelly—and consider it in a different, more expansive way than they would have done on their own, if we can change one person's set "I don't like that" or "my kid could have done it" attitude to a sense of curiosity and openness, we have done something right.

There is much more to it, of course, but that's where I like to start. Critical theory is a lot like theology. In order to debate it, you need to subscribe to a certain dogma and believe in something ineffable. All of us who write about art no doubt believe in it. But when it comes to defining what "it" is, we remain pretty much at sea.

Compartmentalizing visual art can be a futile enterprise, like dissecting a corpse to find the soul. For me, some of the most revealing writers about art have come from the ranks of poetry, philosophy, psychology, literature. As critics, we work in a strange zone where the validity of our judgments (those of us who make them!) can't be proven. The only real measure of our relevance is how readers—and the artists we write about—respond, and how well our ideas hold up over time.