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DOSSIER THÉMATIQUE

ART CRITICISM: WHO NEEDS IT?

This is the text of a talk given at the Albany Institute for History and Art on September 23, 1990

A year or so ago when this topic was mentioned to me, it seemed relatively innocuous. Who needs art criticism? In an art world that has, in the past ten years, seen a transfer of influence from museums, curators, and sometimes critics, to private collectors and commercial galleries, the role of the art critic has been marginalized. It's a reasonable question. Who needs us? Art has become big business, an expensive commodity, a blue-chip investment. On the other hand, as far as the creation of works of art goes, critics have been playing a more and more creative role. As advanced art has shifted toward the conceptual, the theoretical, the intellectualized – and sometimes the overintellectualized – a fruitful dialogue between artists and critics has been taking place. Critics, in the past several years, have sometimes played a generative role in the conceptualization of art. The art world no longer needs us to champion styles and movements the way critics of Clement Greenberg's generation did: public relations people do that now. And as criticism has become more a creative discourse and less a service profession, art itself has become more conscious of its own personal content and public contexts. It's become more analytical and critical, criticizing society and the mass media, addressing sexism, racism, and other politicized issues.

I could argue for the existence of my profession by telling you how much artists need critics. Even though they sometimes claim to disdain us, artists depend on critics for validation and explication of their work. Outside New York, lack of critical discourse is one of the biggest complaints: there's interesting art being made in Baltimore, New Orleans, and Albany, but hardly any support system. By which I mean local art publications and exhibition spaces, serious articles and art reviews. In another season I could explain to you how we critics share in and sometimes shape the discourse of art – as ideas rather than commodities.

But – and it's a big but – at a time when art itself is being threatened, when intolerance is on the rise from both right and left, criticism isn't the big question, art is. In the past year respected artists and art institutions have been under attack by forces that want to curb some very basic constitutional rights. I'm talking about the current climate of censorship in the United States. We're in the midst of a highly irrational national debate about who needs art.

The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) used to give grants to art critics. I doubt that I would be writing now if I hadn't received one of their critics grants. But at the start of the 80s, long before the NEA started playing at being a moral squad for truant artworks, long before anyone ever imagined having censorship problems, the NEA quietly abolished these grants. There was no public outcry, no uproar, no whimper of protest. One of the people on the advisory panel that decided to abolish the critics grants told me that their argument was that no two critics ever quite agreed about any artist or work of art, and since there was no consensus, they had decided that maybe it wasn't a valid discipline. Quite the contrary. That's one of the most fascinating things about art criticism, and about art: it's open to multiple interpretations. In fact the same artist's work can look different at different moments in history, or in different contexts. It's when everybody agrees to agree that you have to start worrying. Then you set official art styles like Socialist Realism.

There's a deep strain of anti-intellectual, anti-cultural sentiment in this country, left over from the days of the puritans and the cowboys. I think of it as visual illiteracy. No one speaks of visual illiteracy, but it's extraordinarily high in this country. Some of the most literate cultured intellectuals – people who are writers, musicians, scientists – are visually illiterate. Knowing how to read is very different from knowing how to see. Most people have never been taught how to read visual images. In the United States, the annual federal budget for the arts is minuscule compared to Canadian and European government support of the arts. It's peanuts.

Let me start over. Art, and I'm talking about art at its best, isn't just entertainment. Art isn't simply decoration or household decor. It's not pretty pictures and statuary to put over the couch or in the garden. Art's function is not ornamental. It is a non-verbal language. Art is a conduit for the deepest human impulses. It tells us – and shows us the future – about ourselves, our society, our time and place, our thought processes, and our most dreaded fears. It's a goad to awareness, and an early warning system. Artists are the voices, the consciences, of any society. And art critics are not public relations people, we're not cheerleaders or investment

advisors or leaders of fan clubs. We're like detectives seeking out clues, deciphering visual codes and symbolic utterances. We're interpreters. We translate the bare physical facts of art objects into the work's myriad possible meanings – mental, emotional, psychological, mathematical, linguistic, historical, whatever. We translate into the language of words.

Reporters at newspapers across the country picked up a politician's misleading description of one of Andres Serrano's photographs. Serrano is the much maligned artist whose work was repeatedly described in the New York Times and everywhere else as "a crucifix immersed in urine". This was not an accurate description. People misunderstood. A New York City bus driver said to me, when I got on his bus carrying some art catalogues: "dunking Jesus in urine, now that's going too far". Now, the piece of art in question is simply a photography. I doubt that any of the reporters went to the trouble of actually looking at this particular work of art.

If they had, surely they would have described it in a number of other ways. The big colour photograph is a radiant warm golden image. It's awe-inspiring, infused with religious sentiment and quite romantic. Serrano obviously wasn't profaning Christ. In fact, a more likely interpretation of his work is that in a very literal way he is restoring the humanity to Christian symbolism. He says his work protests the commercial degradation of religion. By photographing a tawdry plastic crucifix in a very human bodily fluid (he also uses milk and blood) that's a humble daily part of everyone's life and transforming it into something glorious, he manages to reinvest a debased religious object with real beauty and – it's an unfashionable word – spirituality. An artist friend of mine was truly puzzled about the fuss over that picture. "What's wrong with it?" he said. "What's so blasphemous about urine? Didn't God make us all pee?"



Andres Serrano, *Madonna & Child II*, 1989. Cibachrome. New York, Stux Gallery.

Perhaps if the journalists had asked a few art critics to explain this work of art, or Robert Mapplethorpe's or Karen Finley's or David Wojnarowicz's work, they would have written about it with more understanding. Perhaps if our venerable but visually illiterate legislators had consulted a panel of art critics, there would have been no fuss in the first place. Who needs art criticism? At a time when politicians are acting as amateur – and hopelessly unqualified – art critics, when people like Reverend

Wildmon are taking it upon themselves to crop small misleading details of artworks to make them seem indecent, when highly qualified museum directors are being arrested and put on trial for simply doing their job, everyone does. In a country founded on freedom of expression, when the freedom of artists to express themselves is being threatened, everyone needs art criticism more than ever. But the real question right now isn't who needs art criticism. It's who needs art? Who needs theatre? Who needs books? Unfettered, without restrictions or constraints. And the answer is: any healthy culture; any civilization worthy of the name. Redeeming social content is what the arts are all about.

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