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Everyone's a Critic

WANTED: Nuance and transparency



Nuanced interpretation seems as rare these days as a healthy shot of invective.

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The art critic is a beleaguered species. As the print journalism industry shrinks and mainstream newspapers cut back on their editorial staff, the specialist critic has become increasingly expendable.

In an age glutted with images and in which anyone can bang out a blog, art is frequently interchangeable with celebrity and the leisure industry. Everyone, it seems, has a point of view about what is good and what is not. Meanwhile, there is the ominously widespread view, certainly throughout the mainstream media, that the price tag of a work of art is its best indicator of quality.

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The relentless expansion of the art market has brought other problems for critics, who increasingly supplement their dwindling incomes by curating shows and writing essays for commercial galleries. Critical perspectives can easily be clouded by financial considerations.

It all seems a long way from Paul Valéry's 1932 description of art criticism as a form of literature that "condenses or amplifies, emphasizes or arranges, or attempts to bring into harmony all the ideas that come to the mind when it is confronted by artistic phenomena". The domain of art criticism, he writes, "extends from metaphysics to invective".



Valéry declared fashion to be "a ridiculous thing in the arts... a sort of collective or contagious originality always to be suspected of money motives."

Such nuanced interpretation seems as rare these days as a healthy shot of invective. There is such an abundance of work on offer that for a critic simply to write about an artist or an exhibition is in itself viewed as a form of endorsement, regardless of what conclusions are drawn. In this time of spin, all coverage is deemed to be good (and with so many press trips subsidized by the artist or the organization under review, much often is). In our event-driven world, criticism may now be more reactive than proactive—and, arguably, the curator has stolen the march on showcasing new artists.

So what, then, is the role of art criticism? Given all of the above, I would argue that it is more necessary and important than ever. Amidst the hullabaloo of divergent voices, and the ever-more tangled mesh of conflicted interests, a critical voice which is independent, informed, enquiring—and, above all, individual—is desperately needed. Because, without it, the only measure of importance is money, making value a rather wonky, one-legged chair.

There is a strong and certain need for art criticism. Art for art's sake is not enough: art should be tested against reality, shaken up and situated within a wider discourse. We need critical voices to deflect the siren cry of fashion, something Valéry was already sharply aware of when he declared fashion to be “a ridiculous thing in the arts... a sort of collective or contagious originality always to be suspected of money motives”. Indeed.

Good criticism sniffs out the derivative, interrogates orthodoxies and opens up new perspectives. Like the art it examines, it is an agent for change. It is fresh, unexpected and free from jadedness and jargon. A critic has to be a good writer in possession of a good eye. You may not agree with their taste, but you must have faith in their judgment concerning intrinsic quality and take pleasure in being taken on their journey.

It is from the womb of art that criticism was born

Under threat, art critics have become more nimble. There is a realization that the future of criticism lies in being more extensively disseminated, and there is a determination amongst writers that their words reach wider audiences. This is happening through the range of online platforms now on offer beyond conventional analogue outlets.

Websites, podcasts and various forms of social media all mean that infinitely greater numbers can not only access art criticism but that it is also possible to converse and engage with the critics themselves. Ivory towers can be toppled—and without any loss of intellectual integrity.

It is essential for the future health of art that this open and transparent exchange continues to gather momentum for, as Baudelaire put it, “it is from the womb of art that criticism was born”.