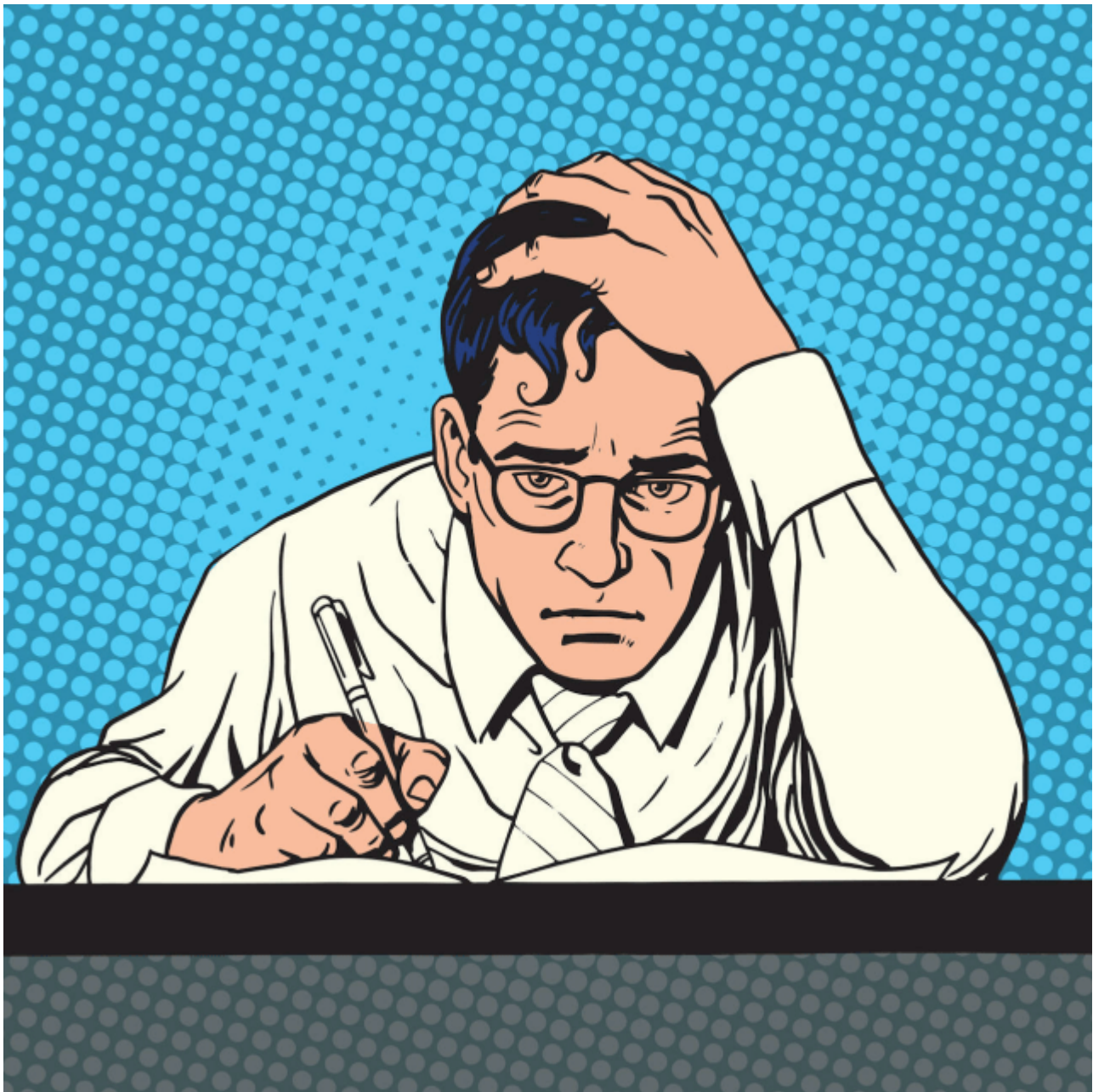


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Why I Am No Longer An Art Critic

What I loved and what made me stop



I still think of myself principally as a writer and curator, as it seems also do my peers who knew me back then.

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When I first began working in the art world, my job required me to write catalog essays, even though I didn't know how to think through a viewpoint or construct a proper paragraph. I did that for about three years (I was a curator at [the New Museum of Contemporary Art](#), then known as The New Museum) and then stopped writing (which was a relief). But in the couple of years that followed, despite my limitations of skill and thought, I somehow knew deep down that I have ideas and perspectives to communicate—that I am a writer. I don't enjoy writing (I don't know many writers who do) but I do gain fulfillment in the result, much of the time.

I started writing about art full-time in the 1980s. Out of the blue I got a call from an old college friend who was an editor at [Manhattan, inc](#), at the time one of the most lively and respected magazines—a business magazine that looked somewhat critically at the business world, a kind of cross between [Forbes](#) and [Spy](#).

The entire senior editorial staff and their writers had walked out of the magazine when the publisher insisted that the editor-in-chief run a cover story about one of the magazine's largest advertisers. Peter knew I was looking for work as a writer, and overnight he became the editor of a section of the magazine called "Corporate Culture", with no writers left on board.

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"Corporate Culture" was the perfect outlet for me to establish myself as an art writer. Up until then, art writing was either critical, often theoretically based criticism, or a kind of general magazine journalism, much of it sycophantic reporting or reviewing of art in the vacuum of art.

My perspective, and what "Corporate Culture" empowered, was a view that art no longer exists in its own world but is, as well, a commodity in a system of commodities. And so I began writing journalistically from a critically informed perspective. There evolved a larger readership for stories about art, which grew along with the market for and popularity of contemporary art. If [Manhattan, inc](#) wasn't in such a desperate need of content at the time, I am sure my first article would have been rejected on submission and that would have been that. But Peter was an amazing editor, and he needed to run a story. He patiently and methodically connected the dots of my random thoughts, evinced a conclusion, and I became a regular contributor to one of the hottest magazines of the time.

After a while, I became a contributing editor of [Connoisseur](#) magazine as well, which at the time was the most prestigious glossy magazine on culture. And then [The New York Times](#) reached out to me to write feature stories about the market and the larger framework of the art ecosystem.

It is hard to maintain spirit for work that our society doesn't seem to value

And then I wrote most of the short critical pieces about art exhibitions in the Goings on About Town section of [The New Yorker](#) for a number of years. I wrote occasionally for [Artforum](#) and [Art in America](#) as well, but I was a writer who needed to support myself from my work, and those magazines didn't pay the rent.

Well, even the glossies paid just \$1 to \$2 a word, which as a journalist friend told me is what he was paid by [Esquire](#) in the 1950s—so the wage scale didn't seem to keep up with the cost of living for at least five decades, maybe longer. Art magazines, by comparison, paid even worse: \$600 for a feature article of about 3,000 words. As the art market grew, and consequently the revenues for art magazine ads shot through the sky, writers' fees didn't change at all. (Museum salaries weren't much better, by the way.)

I was doing quite well for an independent art writer. In the late 1980s and early 1990s I was making over \$50,000 a year, which was substantial for a freelancer, and enough to pay for my apartment, food, pleasure and a couple of trips a year. Then other, more high-profile magazines, like [Vanity Fair](#), reached out to me to write profiles that would have expanded my purview into a broader world of culture.



I continue to write some, and am grateful to still have a forum to communicate what I think is worth sharing.

And then, at the height of my success, it all stopped. A long, slow recession sunk in, the art market fizzled, and the general press wasn't much interested in art anymore. In that quiet year, as I was envisioning what would happen when the wheel started spinning, if it started spinning again, I realized that in all likelihood my annual pay would remain pretty much the same for the rest of my life, and it got me terribly depressed. If I was being compensated at the upper end of the spectrum, and most of my friends who were excellent critics were making far less, I realized we were living in a world that didn't much value what we were doing.

Fortunately, for me, writing opportunities came back, but I had nonetheless concluded that with the less I got, the more I expected to gain, the more I needed the validation of a healthy wage to continue to do what I was doing, to see that what I was doing meant enough to the world that it would pay fair compensation. Also, fortunately for me, art advising landed in my lap one day as if from the sky.

At first I thought I was the luckiest writer in the world, with a built-in fellowship through part-time advisory work, but over time I came to realize that my thoughts and critical beliefs would have stronger and lasting value through my work in helping to form collections—many destined for museums, or forming museums in their own right. All that I had learned as a curator, critic, journalist and communicator in general was channeled into clients, collections, and institutions, and the preparation positioned me well. And it was a lot easier and far more lucrative talking about my passions than writing about them.

And then, at the height of my success, it all stopped

I continue to write some, and am grateful to still have a forum to communicate what I think is worth sharing. I still think of myself principally as a writer and curator, as it seems also do my peers who knew me back then, which further enriches my work and the opportunities I have been fortunate to come my way.

It is hard to maintain spirit for work that our society doesn't seem to value. I think it is tragic and pitiful how the situation today has deteriorated so much as to be endangered. Magazines have been closing left and right, and even online the opportunities for core critical voices seem to be narrowing. This does not bode well for criticism.

Though I hope it creates a stronger, more vigilant range of viewpoints, beliefs and outrages by those who continue to write because, above all else, they resolutely believe in the practice regardless of how society sees and doesn't see what they do, and are lucky or resourceful enough to support themselves from their work. The art world needs insightful criticism all the

more today—have a look at how much mediocrity slips into the precincts of market success. And I'll bet that art writers remain on the bottom of the pile of artists, dancers, musicians, poets and novelists eligible for the kinds of grants that buy you the time you need to do your work and live your life.