

Art Agency, Partners


Art Agency, Partners is a bespoke art advisory firm founded in 2014, and built upon decades of combined experience, to provide counsel to many of the world's leading art collectors and institutions on collection assessment and development, estate planning, and innovative approaches to museum giving and growth.

Critical Meltdown

Art reviewing in crisis



Jake Gyllenhaal as an art critic in Netflix's horror flick *Velvet Buzzsaw* (2019). Copyright Claudette Barius/Netflix

By  Jane Morris

writer and editor

Published 29 August 2019 in [Analysis](#)

The inherent tension in the relationship between artists and critics rarely reaches boiling point. In 1877, the American painter [James Abbott McNeill Whistler](#) took the unusual step of suing British critic [John Ruskin](#) for libel over a particularly damning review while artist [Donald Judd](#), who wrote for [Art News](#) and [Arts Magazine](#) from 1959 to 1965, quite liked sharpening his pen on fellow artists (he described Picasso's work in a 1963 Whitney show as "glib and corny" and dismissed [Lygia Clark](#) in an insultingly brief—34-word—review).



A poster created by Decolonize This Place and MTL+ criticizing Warren Kanders after reports surfaced that his company, Safariland, manufactured tear gas used against migrants at the border. Image courtesy of MTL+/DTP

But incidents like this are rare. So, the degree of heat generated in the coverage of this year's [Whitney Biennial](#) has taken many people both within and outside New York's hothouse art scene by surprise. The debate is raising questions over the state of art criticism, particularly about who writes it—and what (and who) it is for.

First a recap. The trouble began in May, when a raft of major US newspapers and specialist arts titles published so-so reviews of the biennial (until 22 September). The show is widely regarded as a bellwether of the American art scene, focusing on younger, less-well-known US artists, and is described by the museum as “taking the pulse of the contemporary artistic moment”.

This edition has been curated by [Jane Panetta and Rujeko Hockley](#), and includes 75 artists and collectives. The curators said their themes were “the mining of history as a means to reimagine the present or future; a profound consideration of race, gender, and equity; and explorations of the vulnerability of the body”. Most reviewers noted that the show’s artists were (unusually) 50% female and more than half non-white, and indeed it is the discussions around race, and to a lesser extent gender, that have proved most inflammatory.

A number of reviewers, while acknowledging they enjoyed parts of the exhibition, described it as “safe”, especially in the context of Trump’s America and the internal turmoil at the Whitney itself (board vice-chair, Warren Kanders and his wife Allison Kanders, [resigned last month](#) after eight artists withdrew from the biennial amid escalating controversy over Kanders’s ownership of [Safariland](#), a manufacturer of law enforcement and military supplies).

Andrew Russeth, writing for *Art News*, [called the exhibition “polite”](#), and almost “anodyne”. In *The Art Newspaper* Linda Yablonsky [asked what we want](#) from contemporary art, saying the show offered many answers but “controversy is not one of them, nor is the excitement of what we used to call the radical gesture”. Others, including *The Washington Post*, *The New Yorker* and *The Wall Street Journal*, wrote in a similar vein.

In a sense, art criticism is very healthy indeed. So healthy that it is outstripping readers

[Simone Leigh](#), one of the most established artists in the exhibition (who currently has a show at the Guggenheim in New York, “[Loophole of Retreat](#)”, until 22 October), [hit back in an Instagram post](#) to her 31,000 followers. She listed a set of cultural references she considered relevant to her practice and summed up by writing that critics who didn’t spot them “lack the knowledge to recognize the radical gestures in my work”. Meanwhile artist [Nicholas Galanin described](#) Deborah Solomon’s review for New York’s public radio station WNYC as “lazy” because he felt she was dismissive of the concept of “white supremacy”. “You are creating more white noise,” he wrote.

Shortly after, under the headline, “[The Dominance of the White Male Critic](#)”, Elizabeth Méndez Berry and Chi-hui Yang wrote in *The New York Times* that “those who have for decades have been given the biggest platforms to interpret culture are white men. This means that the spaces in the media where national mythologies are articulated, debated and affirmed are still largely segregated. The conversation about our collective imagination has the same blind spots as our political discourse.” Berry and Yang, who run an initiative to diversify criticism titled [Critical Minded](#), called for “old-school white critics... to step aside and make room for emerging and fully-emerged writers of color”.

Who writes it

Earlier this year, arts journalist Mary Louise Schumacher [conducted a survey](#) of more than 300 US art critics and writers for the Nieman Foundation for Journalism at Harvard University. The group, who came from “daily newspapers, alternative weeklies, magazines, digital journals and websites”—including *The New Yorker*, *The Nation* and *The Village Voice*—were questioned about the state of the media.

Schumacher’s findings confirm, among other things, the assertions made by Berry and Yang: non-white critics are under-represented (so too, it should be noted, are Republicans, 85% of the critics described themselves as Democrat voters in the last election).

Sixty per cent of the critics surveyed answered her questions about ethnicity: of these, 167 described themselves as white (80% of the total), four black, five Latino, six Asian and 20 as other or mixed ethnicities. This is only a slight improvement on a survey in 2002 [conducted by the](#) National Arts Journalism Program at Columbia University, which found that 90% of art critics on general interest newspapers and magazines were white. According to the US Census Bureau, 60% of the US population is white, with Hispanic and Latino communities excluded.



Roberta Smith, co-chief art critic of *The New York Times* is one of the few influential female critics at major cultural publications.

The six most influential art critics, according to the respondents, were all white, mostly men and mostly older. They included one woman, Roberta Smith (*The New York Times*), Holland Cotter (also NYT), Jerry Saltz (*New York magazine*), Peter Schjeldahl (*The New Yorker*), Ben Davis (*artnet News*) and Christopher Knight (*Los Angeles Times*). The titles producing the best art criticism, the respondents said, included *The New York Times*, *Hyperallergic*, *The New Yorker*, *Artforum*, *Art in America* and *ARTnews*, all except one based in New York. European writers would maybe have added a few others: *Frieze magazine*, *Art Review*, the *Financial Times* and—for German speakers—the critics in influential papers like the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* and *Die Welt*.

Either way, the US critics' list was dominated by a tiny group of big-circulation, high-profile legacy titles (the only new digital entrant was *Hyperallergic*, founded in 2009) despite the plethora of specialist magazines, websites and blogs devoted to arts reviewing. It is why art critic M. Charlene Stevens says in a piece for *Hyperallergic* that it matters who and why certain critics get "a seat at the table". She runs an independent site called *Arcade Project*. "My problem has always been funding," she wrote. "Venture capital is most often an unattainable goal for a black woman in any industry."

Who reads it and why?

A decade ago, James Elkins, chair of art history, theory and criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, took a different tack, considering art criticism from the point of view of an art historian. "No one knows how many glossy art magazines there are... perhaps 200... in Europe and the US... and 500 or so smaller magazines and journals," he wrote—this was before the emergence of a raft of new titles and sites, from the highbrow, cross-form *White Review* to the glossy, youth-oriented *Elephant*. "In a sense, art criticism is very healthy indeed. So healthy that it is outstripping readers. Yet at the same time art criticism is very nearly dead if health is measured by the number of people who take it seriously. Art criticism is massively produced and massively ignored," he claimed.

The essay was a provocation intended to kick off a series of round-tables on the state of art criticism. While few took Elkins's position, the transcripts of the discussions display a degree of angst about the subject: the same emotion that presumably prompted "*Superscript*", a series of lectures at the *Walker Art Center* in 2015. Speakers included critics like Davis and writer/artist James Bridle, who addressed questions including the "role of the professional art critic in this age of democratized media" where, according to the organizers, "self-promotion, curation, and DIY criticism collide online". But at the Walker, as at Elkins's round-tables, as a newspaper critic pointed out at the time, discussions or research about readers, who they are and what writing they value, was strangely lacking.

While the function of critic has remained static, the art world has metastasized

“Audience is key to any discussion of art criticism, and got surprisingly little attention,” noted Sheila Farr, a former critic at *The Seattle Times*. “Who are we writing for? Why should they care? The standard complaint about academic writing is that it seems to be aimed at other academics. Journalists have a more diverse audience and the opportunity to entice those who know a little about the assumptions of those who do. Just because the opportunity is there, it doesn’t mean we always take it.”

Media owners do, of course, survey readers, but for most it is commercially sensitive information. The Nieman survey sheds a little light: the critics said they were writing for a general audience who cared about art, who had a basic grasp of art and art history (85%) and who thought criticism was important. The critics saw themselves as educators (85%) and champions (60%) more than evaluators. And while they mostly thought they were doing a good job in these roles (60%), their confidence was shakier when it came to the “inside” art world.



As the Whitney Biennial fallout shows, there are much wider and diverse audiences who care about arts and culture. Above, an image of the Whitney protest posted by the reporter Shumita Basu on Twitter

Only half thought today’s criticism “offers reliable guidance and evaluation for [living] artists, curators and galleries” and almost all of them thought artists paid no attention to what they were saying. When he was a journalist, [Art Basel director Marc Spiegler](#) went a step further. He described the critic as “trapped in an inherently reactive and marginalized position... While the function of critic has remained static, the art world has metastasized, growing too big to allow any real overviews... and developing a slew of information channels that bypass critics altogether”.

While in the Nieman survey the US critics were not asked about their readership profiles, it is fairly safe to assume that, like themselves, it is a largely white, affluent, well-educated demographic. The specialist title *ARTnews* (which, unlike most arts titles, has its unusually large circulation periodically confirmed by the Audit Bureau of Circulations) states the average household income of its 55,000 subscribers as over \$180,000. In the UK, the *Financial Times Weekend* section (also audited and specifically designed to attract arts and culture readers to an otherwise business paper) says its 300,000 print subscribers are “the world’s elite”, including 28% “sterling millionaires” with 39% periodically buying art.

But as the Whitney Biennial fallout shows, there are much wider and diverse audiences who care about arts and culture. [Critical Minded](#) focuses on “racial justice in criticism”—but its founders also protest about “class, gender identity, sexual orientation and ability”. They have pointed out the lack of diversity in film criticism and the scarcity of black women writing about the hip-hop scene. Media owners, publishers and editors can only expect the calls for greater equity in representation in their staffing and writing to get louder.

Clickbait has devalued journalism

All this comes as the crisis in journalism—the biggest and most trusted titles aside—is, according to many analysts, only deepening. In January a lengthy article by [Jill Lepore](#) in *The New Yorker* painted a gloomy picture (illustrated, aptly, by an image of the Grim Reaper, scythe in hand). Between 1970 and 2016—“the year the American Society of News Editors quit counting”—500 or so dailies had gone out of business. Between January 2017 and April 2018 a third of the US’s largest newspapers and magazines reported layoffs and “in a newer trend, so did about a quarter of digital-native news sites” Lepore wrote, quoting figures from the [Pew Research Center](#). Pew estimates that 5,000 media jobs disappeared in the US between 2014 and 2017. Layoffs so far this year include 200 at [Buzzfeed](#), 250 at [Vice](#) and 800 at Verizon (which owns [HuffPost](#) among others).

[The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism](#), which conducts research in around 40 countries including the US, found that both traditional “legacy” print brands and new digital entrants had been hit by “structural shifts that have already led to significant falls in advertising revenue”—chiefly new entrants cannibalizing audiences, followed by advertising moving from individual titles and platforms to the social media giants.



Pew estimates that 5,000 media jobs disappeared in the US between 2014 and 2017. Layoffs so far this year include 200 at [Buzzfeed](#), 250 at [Vice](#) and 800 at Verizon (which owns [HuffPost](#) among others).

Combined with free-to-air, ad-supported publishing, this has led to “journalism [that is] hollowed out” and a lack of “distinctive content”, encouraging “clickbait that has devalued journalism”. Trends to expect, Reuters added, include the introduction of paywalls, new subscription models and the diversification of businesses (for example into training, events, membership schemes and sales platforms). Directing investment back in to good-quality journalism to build trust is key, its latest report added.

Arts news editors may recognize these trends but the correlation with art criticism—except for critics working in mainstream newspapers—is far from exact. Business models for specialist critical magazines are notoriously eccentric. History is filled with labours of love, such as *Derrière le Miroire*, *Third Text* and *Parkett*. “Art magazines don’t tend to make money,” *Art Review*’s senior editor J J Charlesworth told a group of gallerists at this year’s [Talking Galleries symposium](#) for gallerists. “*Art Review* was always supported [subsidized] through the difficult times by an interested backer, a collector or a group.”

Art magazines don’t tend to make money

Until its [acquisition by Thomas Shao](#) in June—who also owns the [Chinese Modern Media Group](#)—the deep-pocketed backer was art collector Dennis Hotz. All too often, when titles don’t cover their costs, only the highest-minded publisher can resist the temptation to find cutbacks.

Arguably the most eye-opening statistic in Schumacher’s report on US art criticism was around the issue of pay and job security. She wrote that just 20 people (less than 10% of the total and nearly all of them veteran men) reported making \$80,000 or more—the sort of high-profile posts that come with stability and benefits. More than half the writers surveyed said they earned less than \$20,000 a year, and most were in insecure, freelance jobs.

In 2005, Spiegler wrote that “even the swankiest art publications such as *Artforum*, *Frieze* and *Art in America* pay only \$150 per review”—and in the 14 years since, rates at many arts publications and platforms have barely increased.

In 2005, Spiegler wrote ‘even the swankiest art publications pay only \$150 per review’

“This raises serious questions about who has access to our field and who can afford to work for such wages. One of the critical questions facing the profession is how to support the work of cultural writers in a sustainable way,” wrote Schumacher in [a detailed article accompanying her survey](#).

That question is only amplified by the education level that arts writers (like curators), appear to be expected to attain. Almost all the writers surveyed had undergraduate (college) degrees, but more than two-thirds (almost 70%) also had postgraduate qualifications—including more than 30 with PhDs. It’s no surprise that all but the best-off find there are barriers to entry.

Meanwhile, Schumacher’s own situation is indicative of the situation facing many arts journalists. Her post at the [Milwaukee Journal Sentinel](#) was closed earlier this year. “Another art critic made redundant. Most unsurprising news ever. It was my dream job. Loved every damn minute,” she posted on Twitter.