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Fall 2013

Questions About Painting & Criticism

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This was written from an exchange with Annette Wehrhahn.

Why might it be risky for a critic to write about painting?

One of the obstacles in writing about painting is its appeal. It is perhaps the most desirable and recognizable medium in the visual arts, and the way that many people first encounter fine art. Because of its popularity, its cultural entrenchment, its dependence on pigments and surfaces, its uniqueness and objectness, painting can be very conservative and really marketable, both as an attraction and as a good. All of this is to say that when we write about painting we're addressing a medium that tends towards reserve, is infatuated with its long tradition, and is easily commodified. If you write positively about painting you will almost certainly reward those positions in some way. That's alright, but I hope most people would agree that one of the tasks of criticism is to push against artworks with an aim toward revealing more than what they look like, how they're made, what they purport to be doing, or what their monetary value is.

We need to be wary of easy acceptance of a familiar medium. Because painting is so readily identified by the public as being Art it can serve as a vehicle for new aesthetic and political discourses. There might be two caveats to painting's ability to do that: 1) other artworks in other mediums may be more capable of examining certain ideas and 2) painting and painters are apt to first place themselves into the medium's historical narrative, forming kinds of parochial eddies and tributaries rather than taking on the larger stream of culture and images.

Do critics naturally gravitate towards "conceptual" work that allows them to discuss ideas that interest them in a way painting might not?

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With the exception of more specialized publications, painting is a perennially popular topic for reviews and essays. A cursory look at the publications I read regularly reveals that in the past month an average of greater than 50% of their visual arts reviews and features were devoted to painting/painters. I don't know if that actually answers the question though: it may be that readers or editors gravitate to painting more than critics do. And what are most talked about, important, or beloved by critics may be very different things. We have blind spots, preferences, presiding interests—we can be persuaded or even fooled.

There's a lot of good, interesting painting out there that should provide opportunities for critics to discuss topics of interest to them, either by identifying where they can be found in artworks, or by identifying the ways that art isn't addressing what seems aesthetically or culturally essential right now, or the ways an artwork can be wrong about those same issues. For what it's worth, here's an incomplete list of topics important to me and some artists who I think are addressing them: apparent surface versus hidden substance (David Hammons), the relationship between the digital and the material (Keltie Ferris), the legibility of information (David Malek, Hugh Scott Douglas), the composition of the self within history (Justin Lieberman), the politics of decentralized transmission (Agnes Lux), catastrophic climate change and anthropocentrism (Tomory Dodge), technological upheaval (Dave Miko and Tom Thayer, Ben Schumacher), the interaction of words and images (Tauba Auerbach, Davina Semo), and so on. That list may be found wanting in the future and seems even now like a problematic gesture.

This question assumes that painting can't be as rigorously conceptual as works in other mediums, or that critics don't respond to its ideas in the same ways. Maybe critics prefer "conceptual" work—I don't know. I think there's a lot of bullshit "conceptualism" out there that claims to be investigating or addressing itself to ideas when it's only illustrating a question or making a spectacle; it speaks solely to art, to formal concerns, to a material, to a process, or whatever.

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Painter and sculptor Justin Lieberman said, “I think it’s good that artists continue to ask [...] fundamental questions, but it’s bad if they never contradict themselves. And you can only contradict yourself with a statement.” It seems to me that many artists’ work emphasizes ambiguous speculation, investigations, processes, concepts, and so on, buttressed by rhetoric erected by galleries, schools, critics, by themselves. A dissertation on the geology of the Cargo Muchacho Mountains of Southern California also focuses on questions, processes, concepts, representations, and investigations, but we don’t think about such a document as art. Questions, processes, investigations and the like are only the beginning of where an idea can go. An idea can become an argument, as Lieberman points out, and arguments (dialectics) manifest something about who we are as individuals and as some kind of collective body. Anything can provoke questions; that effort may be essentially onanistic if it’s not aimed at any particular end. Formalism can ask questions and make statements as much as conceptualism can, and that’s just as true of painting as any other medium, and of the criticism that responds to it. It takes some thought and courage to put that into practice, though.

To wager yourself and your thoughts in the service of a proposition that might carry the weight of truth is a risky endeavor. You could be marginalized or harassed for being wrong or for simply being perceived as wrong. But the rewards are much greater. To make a statement about the way relationships between people and things are arranged in the world instantiates you as a thinking person—probably in relation to other thinking people—and sets you into dialectical opposition to other bodies or ideas. And that isn’t even an egotistical, identity-driven personhood. It can be anonymous or collective or it can be contradictory. No matter what, it’s a kind of cogito ergo sum and a fundamentally political act. Really great painting can ask questions and make statements and it should. Critics should approach art in ways that try to achieve those kinds of goals. Is this an argument for some sort of utilitarian art criticism? Maybe. Art and criticism might need utility to conjure bravery.

What is the language one can employ to discuss painting if not using a formal or descriptive lexicon?

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One thing should be said immediately: as noted in the first endnote, one of the elemental obstacles in the language we use to address painting is our inability to say what exactly painting is. The critic needs to repeat the process of making such an assessment almost every time she begins to talk about painting.

Description is necessary as a first step in writing and in assessing a painting since readers need to know what it is you're talking about. Describing an image or an object is usually straightforward; making sense of what the use of the object is can be much harder. It can seem that often, instead of wrestling with the ideas that are available in the work or that might be useful in thinking about an artwork, writers instead elaborate on their own Romantic associations, under-qualified judgments, the artist's claims, the press release, or nothing at all—simply a rote recitation of what the paintings look like and how that appearance performs some kind of rudimentary signification. Jackson Pollock's drips are expressive of his mental states, but why that sign is important is a different question. Art goes from a sensual experience to an intellectual one—part of criticism's work is to engage that maneuver and challenge it, accept it, extend it, define it, or more. I think the language of criticism needs to reflect the language and concerns of the day, or anticipate what those concerns might be, since these are some of the ways we recognize art's relevance across generations. How works of art change through time is important; language can capture that. And *ekphrasis*—whether by prose, fiction, poetry or other means—ought to aim for as much. Critics have such tools already and continue to invent more, but they must also summon the will to use them incisively.

Does the specter of “the death of painting” add some dimension to the risks writers take?

Painting hits impediments, but it doesn't die. For the reasons cited at the top, it will always persevere. Besides that, there's no risk in writing about a dead medium—if it's dead then you can't do anything to harm it, only help revive it. When painting has been declared dead previously it was only because critics, artists, or viewers weren't fully cognizant of what was then becoming vital to the medium. What's important or what appears important to painting at any given time changes, and it may look completely

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different in retrospect. The sculptor Rachel Harrison, in an interview for *BOMB* a few years ago, complained that, “Now we have a whole school of formalism rooted in the retro-modernist sensibility that, to my eyes, looks like nothing. It’s passing through a lot of doors because it says it knows what it is. Sometimes it even says it’s about nothing, and that seems to be okay too. [...] This seems like a petrified way to work. It worries me.” She could be right, though I feel that figuration is now the emptier pursuit for its sentimentality and attachment to allegory, photography, and performance. She or I or both of us could be missing what is currently valuable or harmful in art. Time will tell. The piling up of history, and its lineage of judgments such as these, is both a blessing and a curse: one’s notion of an artwork’s place in the annals could grow more prescient or more irrational as time progresses. But we are also free to re-evaluate our own thinking, claims, positions, and should feel pressed to do so, knowing that it’s always difficult to raise skeptical objections, especially to our own ideas.

There are hierarchies that should be considered in the deployment of risk. We should recognize that as established commercial artists Harrison and Lieberman are speaking from different positions than critics do. They have a different kind of power and influence.

In expressing those opinions they don’t risk the same things, to the same degree, or for the same reasons that a younger artist, critic, curator, student, or other people in the arts would in expressing the same judgment. That isn’t to say that they do or don’t say things differently, but they might and the places they speak from or how they are heard engender very different responses than another member of the art world would. Imagine the same words coming from the mouth of Larry Gagosian, an undergrad in her painting class, Roberta Smith, or Eli Broad.

I, for example, am a young critic doubtful of my historical perspective and with an interest in painting and a fear of hurting anyone’s feelings or puffing up flaccid art. Part of that fear is a kind of inculcated and insipid careerism; another part is my own tendency towards insecurity and the recurrent experience of being shown that I’m wrong. Those things can act as nagging self-doubt, a blind spot, a disincentive.

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This, perhaps, gets at stakes. I think it may be good to ask why risk is valuable. Werner Herzog has repeatedly risked lives, money, his reputation, and made spectacular movies. Hedge funds recently risked fantastic sums of money and ended up destroying a lot of wealth, even lives.

How do we distinguish between what the word/idea of risk is in those situations or in the work of the critic?

It's good to be able to recognize what one is risking in what they do, but it is also very difficult. In a brutal 1985 review of TJ Clark's *The Absolute Bourgeois* by Hilton Kramer, the famous curmudgeon imagined he was risking being perceived as a hawkish brute. He disingenuously asserted that Clark was uninterested in aesthetics and used his book only to glorify Marxism, that Clark snubbed any image that didn't support his critical model. What Kramer didn't realize is that he was risking looking like a fool.

Knowing what can and must be wagered (or even what is being wagered) in a piece of writing or art can be a challenging task—it sometimes requires choosing between various hard options. It would seem, though, that risk always involves the rejection of clichés or conventional wisdom. It eschews easy comfort. It comes when one says what one believes and then asks repeatedly why that should be the case. Risk should require intellectual honesty, but perhaps doesn't always accede to that standard. For painting, as above, it may be especially the case that writing must also risk provincialism and salesmanship.

The stakes of all arts come down to what can be and needs to be represented and how. Those stakes can change or be multiplied over time. A friend recently told me that he doesn't feel that painting is as relevant to contemporary artistic conversations as, say, sculpture, Internet-based art, video, performance, etc. I think that's untrue, but it also seems to me to be a good argument for thinking especially hard about painting, about how we respond to it now. So go do it.