



# Flight From Judgment

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Remember a time when we used to have art critics?

(If you are a new collector, you probably don't)

In 2003, James Elkins, wrote a little book, not much bigger than a pamphlet, titled *What Happened to Art Criticism?*

“In worldwide crisis ... dissolving into the background clutter of ephemeral cultural crisis ... [art criticism is] dying ... massively produced, and massively ignored.”

The gist of the book is that the art world produces more writing than ever before, from exhibition essays to press releases to newspaper, print and media platform content. However, quantity has not only not increased impact but has in fact dissipated it. One of the reasons for the loss of relevance is what Elkins identifies as the “flight from judgment, and the attraction of description.” To put it another way, it is the suspension of the responsibilities of the art critic as an expert, with the skills and ability to form a reliable judgment on the merits of an artwork.

Such judgments gave us press wars in Paris in the 19th century, which gave rise to Fauvism and Impressionism. For all the art theory controversies he has generated, no one can deny the importance of Clement Greenberg in championing the artists of Abstract Expressionism from Rothko to Pollock, Frankenthaler and de Kooning.

However, if you pick up or click on almost any art publication or art related media content today, you will see Elkins’ “flight from judgment” in action. Social media and the online environment have made the “flight from judgment” even easier, with pre-digested, ‘instagrammable’ content, which enables technology to drive the market and the market to drive the art. Conversely, art writing aimed at professional/erudite audiences not only regales itself in an impenetrable lexicon and obscure references but more importantly, almost invariably addresses itself to subjects the writer admires and is interested in. With no comparison, the reader is not able to genuinely become educated through such writing.

We live at a time in which writing, instead of being a tool and guide, has too often become a substitute for meaning and as an outcome, disempowered both the text and the art. In a poignant essay called ‘Remember When Art Was Supposed to Be Beautiful?’ Joseph Bravo provides some answers to the question of the demise of art criticism and pre-eminence of text over meaning:

Aesthetic discourse is quite difficult but politically correct cliché is much easier and predictably more ubiquitous.

Aesthetics requires a mastery of comprehension of the artisanal craft and the metaphysical invocation as well as the political context; whereas PC cliché only requires the affectation of one of these priorities and not even bona fide expertise in it.

He also provides artists with a relational dynamic, which is age old and yet currently being dispensed with, a relationship of empathic responsibility:

Genuine aesthetic communication rests on empathy between the artist and the viewer. If art is to maintain some intrinsic cultural relevance, then the audience indeed needs to be broadened. With that broadening of the audience must also come a broadening of the messages and the identity of the messengers as well, even at the risk of a disquieting cacophony. But ideally, each artist would be endeavouring to expand that empathic communication to edify as wide a range of humanity as possible. If artists are to speak with their audience rather than merely at it, then they should seek to find at least a point of common

ground on which to plant that seed of empathy.

In terms of understanding artistic process, the field has become open for people from virtually every other sphere of knowledge to feel qualified to comment on art, work in art and alongside artists. While we would never expect a cardiologist to give an opinion on dental treatment, when it comes to art, we shy away from declaring that professionalism and expertise in the field is something to defend and aspire to. So, a political theorist, anthropologist and literary critic all feel perfectly qualified to comment on art and wield influence in a time when we are told that anything and everything can be said about it.

There is clear evidence of this in the annual 'whose who' fest, the ArtReview 100, which lists those wielding the most influence in art, people described as "theorists on science, technology and feminism." Only 23 members of the lofty list are artists and even as such, they need to have their credentials propped up by other activities, for instance, Luc Tuymans (curating) and Wolfgang Tillmans (activism). Critics or writers are nowhere to be found. Not even the stellar Roberta Smith, New York Times' most important critic, who has been the bastion of the profession for over 40 years or the social media omnipresence, Jerry Saltz. Both Smith and Saltz who possess encyclopaedic knowledge and expertise in the fields of contemporary art and art history, are not considered sufficiently significant to make it on the list.

Ironically, the flight from art to social relevance, while proclaiming to champion various progressive ideologies and causes, has served to facilitate the assetisation of art. With artists and genuine art critics in the minority of influence, the actors who currently drive the art world might not prioritise furthering the aims of art but rather seek to instrumentalise it either ideologically or commercially. After all, it is easier to market and sell to

new and under-informed buying audiences who stop relying on their eyes and buy on the basis of what they read or are advised to purchase.

Alongside the importance of text, in addition to market and sales as key drivers, we have seen an effusive rush to advertising which masquerades as content and the celebration of such. Numerous platforms generate daily pictorial and advertorial content on art and are widely read, with few questioning the fact that they are essentially sales platforms with a business model. They rely on the sales of artworks but more importantly, on hefty subscriptions paid for by galleries. As a result, they have a vested interest in writing predominantly entertaining content which appears alongside advertorial content. A recent analysis of 'Top 10/20 booths' at art fairs by art platforms revealed little overlap between the selections but a huge connection between advertisers and partners on the platform. In a climate of celebrity and market, people begin to look at the Financial Times and Wall Street Journal for serious writing about art rather than source information from art historians or critics.

The shift away from art-focused discourse is also intricately tied to sources of funding for the arts, because funders also form part of the buying class, although in a slightly different way. Major funding is mostly in the hands of bureaucrats who are ill-equipped to engage with the aesthetic discourse but remain adept to seeing the 'merits' of art as a tool of social policy. The funding-dependent curatorial fraternity has collaborated in co-opting and promulgating art that fits within such frameworks, elevating what has become known as 'institutional art.' Given that the curatorial community is not large and has a lot vested in publicity, its members circulate widely across art prize juries, aiding in the selection of artists and representing galleries at art fairs.

As a result, what is exhibited and promoted might not necessarily be the best, most representative or historically significant. This is especially the case of contemporary art

from Africa, where local markets and galleries are emerging and government funding for the arts remains inadequate. Conversely, the international market attention and promotion has been towards reaching the pockets of the rich from the 'Global North.' It is then not surprising that artists who become internationally visible are those who best fit in with Western aesthetics and notions of what Africa is and should be. It is understandable that, given the historical under-representation of art from the continent, there is an urge to celebrate and promote current achievements. However, there is a risk of landing on the wrong side of art history, especially if we believe that Africans can and will develop their own sustainable art scenes, major collections, art institutions and aim for self-determination in art.

While it is fashionable and even fun to follow the press and the 'whose who' partaking in international art fairs, many galleries in Africa and the artists they work with cannot and will not, for a long time, be able to afford to take part in Art Basel or even 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair. Cost of participation, visa regimes and financial system dramas, not to mention selection criteria and market preferences, ensure that the majority of galleries taking part in international African art fairs and related events are not from the continent.

If one wants to meaningfully support the development of contemporary art in Africa, one needs to research, follow and support art production and art institutions based in the continent. Local galleries and art institutions are invested not only in the development and promotion of artists but also in their lives. They work in a way that is just as relevant to Africa as it is to the international market, because this is the only long term sustainability that can be relied on, when international trends shift. International galleries representing African artists are not best positioned to do that; their wellbeing depends on the ability to respond to the concerns in their own setting and markets. Understanding that difference is crucial.

As for developing a personal collection, it is important to recognise that in art, as in any field vast in history and knowledge, there is no substitute for personal education, with the awareness of the anxious manipulation that is the current state of the market. It might be a fun game keeping up with the art world gossip and machinations in order to gage price movements. These are the factors that definitely impact on short and medium term prices of art works. However, you can be sure that you will not be able to keep up with all of them, all of the time – which also applies to those of us professionally invested in the field. Moreover, these splashes of attention are only small contributors to long-term historical value, which develops over centuries rather than years. What you can keep up with, and what you can gain a measure of control and certainty over is your ability to understand and appreciate the merit of the work as well as the evolution of your taste. Sure, it can be difficult to separate real information from the hype but it is not rocket science. It is far more about developing an understanding of art making rather than what is written about it as an ex post facto rationalisation. It is about learning how to use your eyes and letting that guide your ears, i.e. the questions you ask about the artist, their abilities, and the importance of their contribution to the field.

Speaking to artnet.com, Laurence Dreyfus, an international art advisor commented about the collectors she works with, stating that “they don’t buy with their ears, but they base their choices on culture,” ... “[they] know art history very well...what they collect is based on knowledge and curiosity.” It is a good rule of thumb.

#### BOOKS REFERENCED:

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