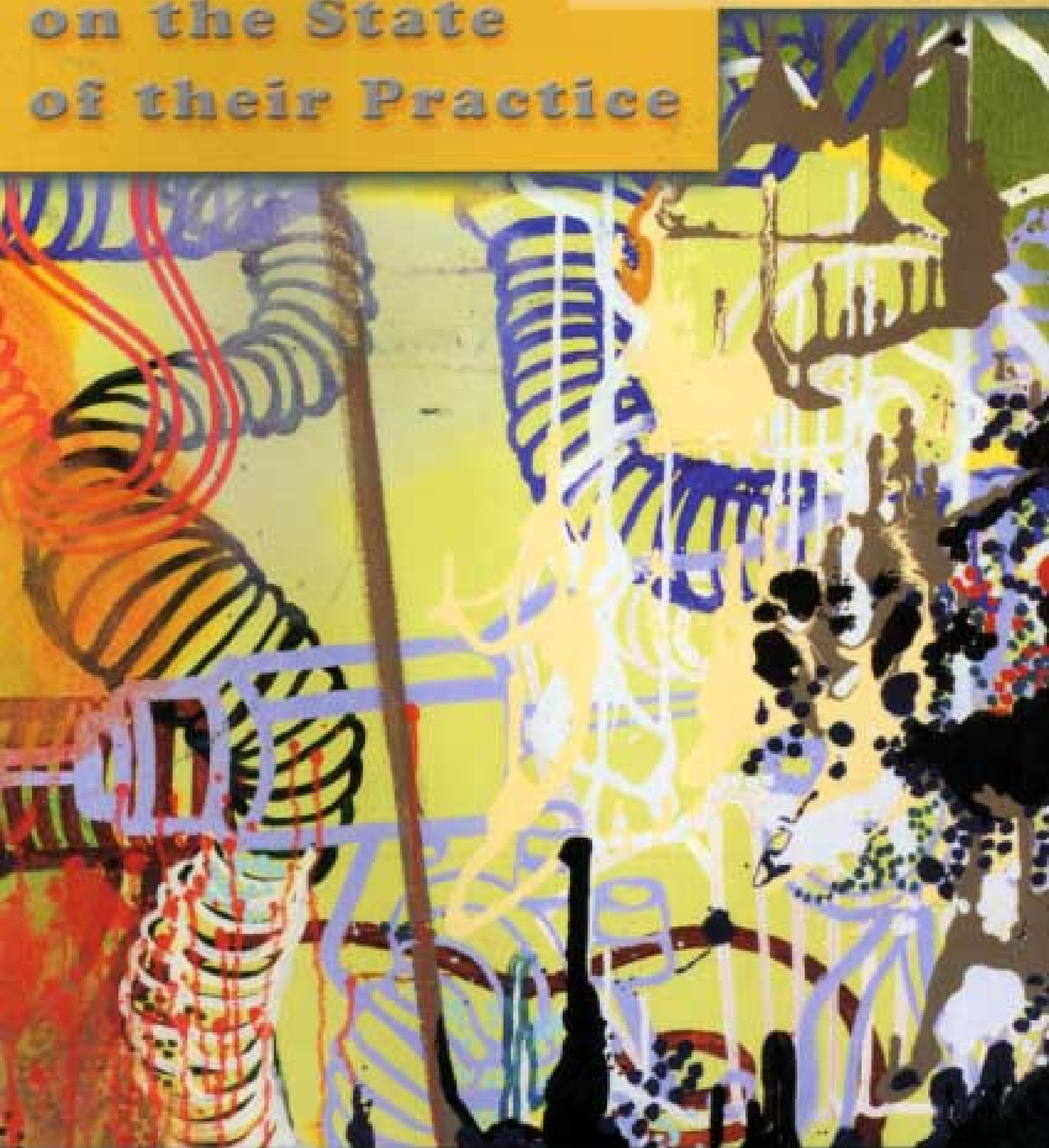
Critical Mess

Art Critics on the State of their Practice



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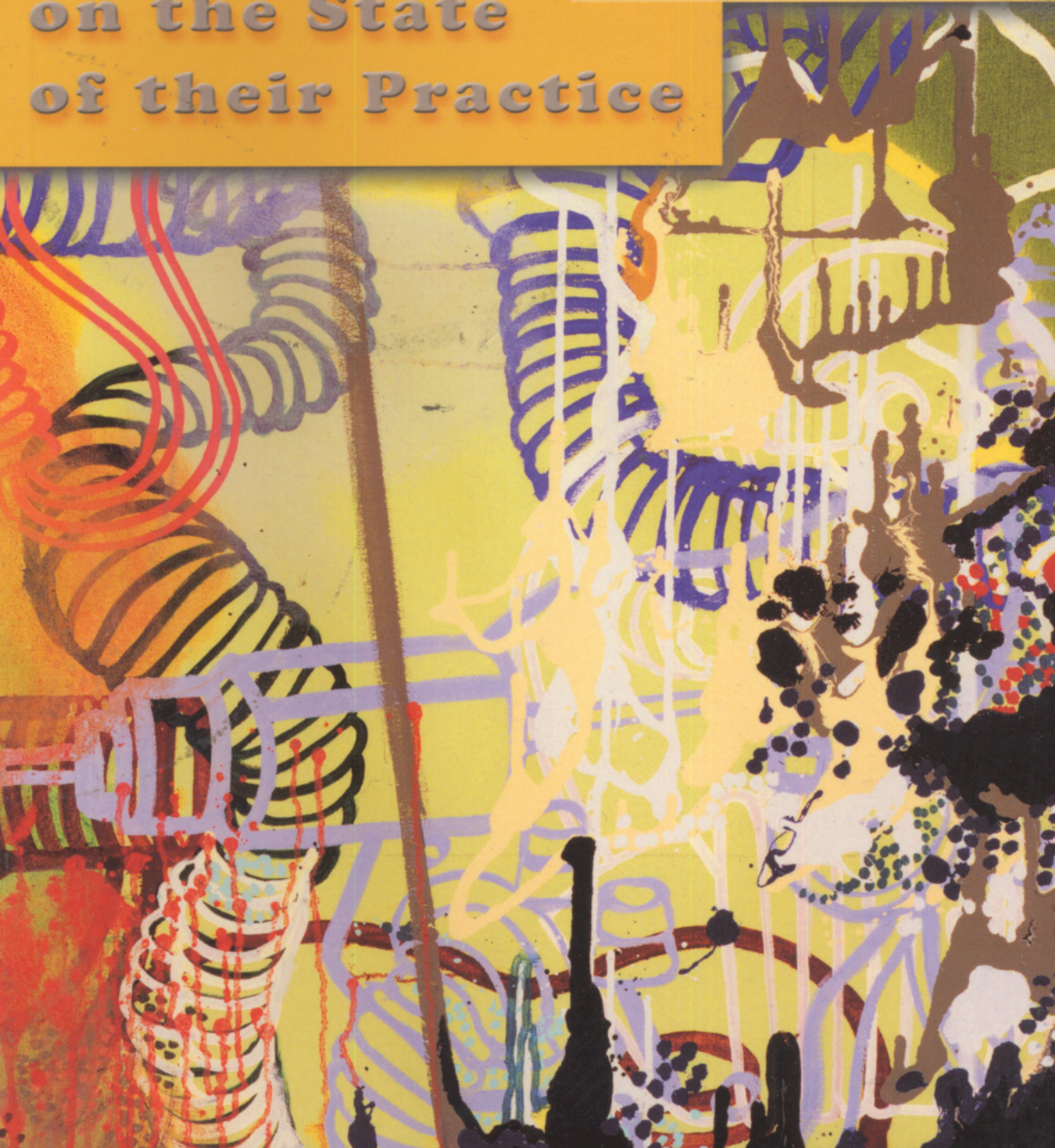

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A Quiet Crisis

Painting and the Past

Forgetting the past, or keeping it safely quarantined, or never having known it in the first place—much of what's wrong with contemporary painting is, I think, the result of people and institutions adopting those attitudes. "Wait a moment," some readers may cry, "isn't there a lot of historically informed painting being made today? Aren't artists doing all kinds of cultural archaeology?"

Well, yes, but to remember the past, to really engage it, isn't simply a question of recycling some old styles, of recuperating, say, Photorealism in the manner of Richard Phillips and the recent Jeff Koons, revamping Color Field painting à la Monique Prieto (who really needs to answer to the ghost of Ray Parker), or behaving like one of the countless architecture-obsessed young painters who are channeling the palette and styles of early '70s graphic design. In a revivalist, remake-loving culture such as ours, there's nothing easier than playing the citation game. I'm talking about something else, something more on the order of looking at a painting made in 2002 by Brice Marden and asking how it stands up in terms of visual engagement against a canvas painted in 1952 by Joan Mitchell. Even more, I'm talking about Marden asking himself such a question, or Richard Prince wondering how one of his text-over-abstract-ground paintings compares to one of Archie Rand's "Letter Paintings" from ca. 1970, or Philip Taaffe pondering what would happen if one of his symmetry-obsessed canvases were hung alongside a multi-panel Norman Bluhm painting from the 1980s.

These are certainly questions that have occurred to me as I compare the seeming inexhaustibility of Mitchell's early work, its combination of painterly virtuosity and elusive gestalt, with what I feel to be the empty complexities of Marden's recent tangled-line paintings; as I reflect on how Taaffe's widely praised arrangements of

repeating, layered decorative motifs seem underdeveloped, even lazy, in confrontation with Bluhm's architectonically nuanced experiments in symmetrical composition; as I make my choice between the dreary cynicism conveyed by slapping banal jokes over equally banal abstract fields (Prince) and the jubilant cultural realignment of inviting the names of countless jazz and R & B legends into a quirky version of Color Field painting (Rand). Of course we all have our preferences in art and our own list of heroes and villains. What troubles me, however, is the feeling that I'm quite alone in making such comparisons—alone not merely because some of the bodies of work I'm using for comparison (Bluhm's and Rand's) have become marginalized, but because there is so little interest in making these kinds of qualitative, transgenerational match-ups, among observers, critics, and artists alike.

Too few painters seem willing to get into the ring with great artists of the past, to really grapple with their strong predecessors. Instead, we have a lot of shadow boxing and influence without anxiety. Hats off to painters who do take up such challenges directly, as Lisa Yuskavage does with Bellini and Degas (albeit refracted through *Playboy* centerfolds), Jane Hammond with Oyvind Fahlström and Frida Kahlo, Richmond Burton in relation to Pollock and Matisse, Carroll Dunham with Guston, and Jonathan Lasker and Lydia Dona with practically the entire corpus of postwar abstraction. It almost seems as if such ambitions have become inappropriate or irrelevant, a kind of unnecessary encumbrance in an art world that tends to value speedy apprehension and the glamour of new technologies. Even among contemporaries, there's a general unwillingness to get into artistic tussles, or even dialogue.

As a result, new artists emerge, new bodies of work are shown, and countless group exhibitions are touted as revelatory, to strangely little consequence. Styles change with seasonal predictability. No one articulates the grounds on which certain artists become famous and others are marginalized. If there were any kind of real dialogue, we would be discussing how Alex Katz and, posthumously, Martin Kippenberger have become the most influential painters of the moment, and what that might mean (more '70s nostalgia and the rediscovery of "bad painting"? A newfound passion for autobiographical art?); we would not just pay lip service to the stunning artistic achievement of Chuck Close over the last decade in his grand, retinally overcharged, mosaic portraits, but recognize that he has set a new standard of ambition for

contemporary painting; and we would simply be doing more to comprehend the unexpected explosion of interest in painting around the world. But almost no one seems to bother with such questions. Instead, everything seems to happen without explanation, as if the realm of contemporary art were merely following the rule of some natural order. There's no need to spell things out in today's art world, and in any case, value judgments and the quest for historical significance are so yesterday; it's all about spin, about discussing the artist's self-declared subject matter rather than hazarding any potentially invidious comparisons between one artist and another. More often than not, critical and curatorial activity consists largely of gathering works according to theme or genre.

But classification, some might argue, is the only viable response to a pluralistic era, when there is no prevalent style or shared set of esthetic criteria. They'll say that we're in a replay of the 1970s when, as Peter Schjeldahl has recalled, criticism "became a matter of just keeping track of things, making taxonomical systems—all these artists who were sort of equally worthy and how do we keep them all in mind."[1] To which I would counter that in the 1970s there seems to have been plenty of vigorous critical dialogue in the pages of countless journals from *The Fox* to *Art Rite* and in the lofts and bars of SoHo. Furthermore, the pluralism of the 1970s transpired in an art world far less commercialized, capitalized, and institutionalized than the one we live in now. Interestingly, Schjeldahl himself is troubled by current notions of pluralism. In a recent *New Yorker* review of a drawing exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, he noted, approvingly, that throughout the show "a viewer's powers of discrimination are called into play. Nothing could be further from the festivalist pluralism of so many contemporary group exhibitions (Documenta, the Whitney Biennial) that pat the darling tousled heads of all artists equally."

We're also beginning to see artists expressing a similar hunger for tougher critical distinctions. In the course of a recently published essay about his early career, Alex Katz pauses to blast the present moment: "Things started to unravel about fifteen years ago. The pursuit of novelty has led to democracy in action which does not have anything at all to do with committed painting. Painting is not democratic. Some painters have more energy and skill than others. Some painters have more interested audiences. Discrimination is greatly diminished."[2] If Katz, whose flat, style-conscious figuration informs so much current painting, is dismayed about the state of painting, things must be very bad indeed.

A prominent painter of a younger generation, John Currin, known for his blending of old-masterish technique and kitsch-ridden eroticism, appears to take an equally dim view of the state of painting. In the catalogue of the traveling European exhibition "Cher Peintre," he tells an interviewer that "most contemporary painting is terrible because the culture around it—apprenticeship, visual connoisseurship—is dead." I'm not a great fan of Currin's work (to my eye, Yuskavage, who's also taken with old masters and zaftig models, is a far more daring and accomplished painter), but I fully agree with him that painting is conditioned by several generations of de-skilled students and from the resulting low expectations on the part of viewers. The medium exists in a kind of thronging void, where the breakdown of consensus has resulted not so much in liberation and experiment as in a kind of bazaar-effect, an artistic landscape populated by young painters drawing on all kinds of styles to produce what *New York Times* critic Holland Cotter has perfectly characterized as "well-schooled, craftsmanly busywork."[3] They have slight pictorial ambitions and little sense of what might constitute a powerfully innovative painting. But why should they bother with such complications? These days, it just takes a gallery full of attractive canvases with some pop-culture references and a soupçon of high-culture critique, and you're headed for the Whitney Biennial or a solo show at one of our proliferating contemporary art museums.

Post-Critical Criticism

Part of the problem, surely, is that we have so few consistently tough art critics, a fact confirmed by a recently released report from Columbia University's National Arts Journalism Program that surveyed 169 art critics at daily newspapers, alternative weeklies, and news magazines.[4] Amid much predictable information (journalistic art critics tend to be poorly paid, plagued by job insecurity, and overwhelmingly white), is the startling revelation that, in the words of the report, "rendering a personal judgment is considered by art critics to be the least important factor in reviewing art." Nearly 75 percent of the responding critics felt this way, while 91 percent felt that their main role was to "educate the public about visual art and why it matters." Given these answers, it's not surprising to learn that the vast majority of critics say they write predominantly positive reviews.

This bias toward educational criticism outraged *Los Angeles Times* critic Christopher Knight. "Criticism is a considered argument about art," he wrote, "not a priestly initiation of the unenlightened into a catechism of established knowledge. Education is a lavishly funded bane of today's increasingly institutionalized art world, where Puritan exhortations about the value of learning over sensuous experience and unruly imagination regularly destroy art's singular worth. Apparently the epidemic has spread, laying low the nation's art journalists."[5] Of course Knight and the Columbia report participants are hardly the first to have noticed a shift in critical priorities. In 1998, the art historian Maurice Berger, inspired by the controversy around Arlene Croce's infamous "nonreview" of a dance by Bill T. Jones, edited an anthology of essays titled *The Crisis of Criticism*. In his introduction, Berger suggested that a variety of social forces were marginalizing the critic's role. "The rising significance of community-based cultures," he wrote, "the increased targeting of niche markets, the dissolution of the boundaries between high and low culture, and the concomitant ethnic and geographic diversity of audiences for culture have lessened and even delegitimized the need for dominant, centralized critical voices."[6]

Two of the few critics who do seem to have escaped delegitimization and the educational temptation are Roberta Smith at the *New York Times* and Jerry Saltz at the *Village Voice*. Recently, in a frank, anecdotal piece about the role of the art critic, Saltz described his ambition as wanting to be "what Peter Plagens calls a 'goalie,' someone who in essence says, 'It's going to have to be pretty good to get by me.'"[7] One doesn't have to always agree with Saltz and Smith (and I often don't, especially when it comes to their soft spots for teenage-themed art) to appreciate how these two writers, who happen to be husband and wife, take judgment-making very seriously. (So, too, I might add, do Smith's *NYT* colleagues Holland Cotter and Ken Johnson.) They also aren't afraid to denounce the missteps of major institutions—witness Smith's recent critique of the Whitney and Saltz's diatribes against the Guggenheim.

Alas, prestigious as their platforms are and impassioned as their voices may be, Smith and Saltz don't ultimately make much difference. They may be great goalies, but the way the game is played, they are usually left standing on the sidelines while artists, dealers, consultants, and collectors keep scoring with whatever balls they want, as often as they please. While critics have never had much real decision-making power, these days even their opinions seem hardly to matter. During a recent

roundtable discussion on criticism organized by the journal *October*, art historian Benjamin Buchloh observed how "the judgment of the critic is voided by the curator's organizational access to the apparatus of the culture industry (e.g., the international biennials and group shows) or by the collector's immediate access to the object in the market or at auction." Buchloh, who is known for his Marxist-inflected examinations of European avant-garde art, laments that "you don't need criticism for an investment structure, you need experts."[8] Another factor, though Buchloh doesn't say so, is that museums and galleries simply detour around potentially judgmental critics. This seems to be the approach of Maxwell L Anderson, the director of the Whitney Museum. In the National Arts Journalism report he brashly (and perhaps rashly?) dismisses the importance of critics: "For those of us about whom criticism is written, the poison pen has less influence today. Museums have become more sophisticated about bringing their messages directly to a potential audience through promotions, listings, advertising, direct mail, targeted e-mail, and other vehicles."[9]

A few years ago when critic Dave Hickey was invited to curate a show at apexart, a small New York alternative space, he prefaced the exhibition with some observations about the differences between curators and critics: "First, of course, art critics habitually speak for themselves. They conceive themselves as private citizens with singular opinions striving to be heard within a cacophony of competing voices and opinions. They don't decide what we see, in other words. They only argue about whether it is worth seeing or not . . . . Curators, however, do decide. They include and exclude, and, as a consequence, the eccentric, combative tastes and opinions that constitute an art critic's abiding virtue quickly become vices in curatorial practice. Critics have freedoms commensurate with their lack of power. Curators have responsibilities that derive from their actual power to exclude, so they must always see themselves, in some sense, as public servants. When two curators agree, their agreement is taken to represent a consensus of public taste. When two critics agree, one of them is redundant."[10] Since making these observations, Hickey's major statement has been curatorial: he organized the 2001 SITE Santa Fe Biennial. While that show embodied Hickey's independent-minded, pleasure-seeking take on art, he has been less visible as a critic of late (catalogue essays are no substitute for articles and books); I miss his maverick voice.

Feeling relatively powerless in the art world's starmaking machinery, many critics have decided that they can be most effective by serving as

advocates for a particular group of artists or type of art, rather than setting themselves up as surveyors of the entire scene. That has been my approach over the last ten years; there seemed nothing to be gained by writing about artists I didn't like, by trying to assume some censorious, Greenberg-style position, and in any case the kind of comprehensive, systematic confidence on which such authoritarian criticism rests seemed historically obsolete. (As the often-prescient Thomas McEvilley announced in the early 1990s: "The purpose of criticism will no longer be to make value judgments for others."[11]) This has been a period of interpretation rather than judgment, which is no doubt why the philosophically inclined Arthur C. Danto has been the most widely read and cited critic of the last decade or so. As Danto says explicitly in the introduction to a recent collection of articles (which, significantly, is subtitled "Essays in a Pluralistic Art World"): "The freedom to choose my subjects makes it possible for me to select only those artists whose work already has quality sufficient enough that nothing need be said beyond explaining the way they embody their meanings."[12] Recently, however, I've begun to feel that something more than explaining and advocacy is called for, that it's not enough to simply present the things you like in isolation, that even in a radically multipolar artistic environment, value judgments must somehow be made and articulated.

A Breakdown—Is London to Blame?

For a painting enthusiast like me, last spring and fall in New York should have been a moment of celebration. Returning to the city in May after a seven-month sojourn in Arizona, I could hardly believe how many paintings were on view in Chelsea. The gallery scene I'd left behind had been, at least as I remembered it, devoted almost wholly to video and photography. But now, in the space of a few blocks, I saw solo shows of new work by established figures such as Brice Marden, David Reed, Sue Williams, Juan Usle, Stephen Ellis, Richard Prince, Carroll Dunham, Susan Rothenberg, Peter Halley, and Ed Ruscha; a two-person show by Beatriz Milhazes and Polly Apfelbaum; and solo shows of relative newcomers Linda Besemer and Randy Wray. This unexpected banquet of current painting in galleries was concurrent with MoMA's Gerhard Richter retrospective, and following it came what seemed to be an international wave of painting-related events: big museum group shows like the three-venue exhibition in

Basel titled "Painting on the Move"; "Cher Peintre," which was organized by the Pompidou Center and also seen at museums in Austria and Germany; "Pertaining to Painting" at the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston; an exhibition titled "Painting Report" at P.S.1; one called "Painting as Paradox" at Artists Space; the Joan Mitchell retrospective at the Whitney; and a giant new book from Phaidon, *Vitamin P: New Perspectives in Painting*, that touts painting (and 114 painters) as good for you. In his introduction to *Vitamin P*, critic Barry Schwabsky admits that "it is no longer possible to presume to know all that is going on in painting"—I know just what he means.[13]

While there was much that I liked—Reed, Dunham, Wray, Apfelbaum (one of my favorite painters even though she never touches canvas or brushes), Besemer, paintings by Fabian Marcaccio and Al Held at P.S.1, the first ten years of the Mitchell retrospective, an entrancing show of Marlene Dumas's work at the New Museum—there was also much that bothered me: a dead hand and a cautious esthetic pervaded Marden's recent work, and he is supposed by many to be our best abstract painter; Williams's paintings also seemed formulaic, offering little in the way of challenges for either artist or viewer. If her bright, sinuous brushstrokes have more vitality about them than Marden's curving bands of color, their interrelationships seem perfunctory and, upon close inspection, their slithery grace ultimately not much more impressive than your or my Magic Marker doodles—a far, far cry from the late de Kooning paintings to which her work is often compared. Prince's earnestly painted, thoroughly banal abstractions emblazoned with the texts of equally banal jokes made me wonder, not for the first time, why this photo-appropriationist-turned-painter persists in engaging a medium to which he has so little to contribute. With only a couple of exceptions, the sixty emerging painters at Artists Space came across as derivative and dreary. Then, casting a shadow that seemed to stretch from 53rd Street to Houston Street, there was Richter, the subject of every painter-to-painter and painter-to-critic conversation in town. Despite the inclusion of many canvases of obvious historical importance and visual punch, and the presence of two powerful groups of paintings (the encyclopedia-derived "48 Portraits, 1971-72," and "October 18, 1977," his meditation on death and terrorism of 1988), the exhibition confirmed for me why I have always preferred the Dionysian Sigmar Polke to the Apollonian Richter. Gifted with a great pictorial intelligence, Richter leaves so little to chance in his paintings that they, too, often come across as illustrations of his interesting ideas,

rather than explorations of them. What made the Baader-Meinhof and encyclopedia series different was the sense that the artist had bitten off more than he could chew, and that exciting things were happening visually and thematically that he didn't anticipate. I also felt, and not for the first time, that the popularity of his work owes perhaps a little too much to the frequency of soft-focus female nudes, verdant landscapes, and decorative, pseudo-gestural abstractions. One can't help admiring Richter's ability to annex romantic clichés for contemporary art, but does he really discover something new in them?

Instead of feeling positive about the state of painting and its apparent ubiquity, I found myself puzzled. So many people I talked to seemed enthusiastic about Marden, worshipful of Richter, and excited about Williams; newspapers and magazines were full of praise for their work. Didn't they care that the emotional tone of Richter's work swings between the saccharine and the gelid? That Williams was producing watered down de Koonings and easy riffs on Color Field painting? That Marden's paintings had lost their wobbly grace and nuanced lines (still evident in the artist's drawings)? Was I the only one to see that Reed's light-filled, multilayered paintings were technically and conceptually far ahead of the more celebrated Marden and Williams? That Held's monumentally scaled, weirdly sublime geometric landscapes embodied an almost unprecedented pictorial ambition in recent American art? That Marcaccio's multimedium canvas at P.S.1, followed up by an even more ambitious show at Gorney Bravin + Lee, was one of the most innovative paintings created by a New York-based painter in years?

I recalled a comment I'd come across a few years before, in a collection of essays by the artist-writer Mira Schor: "A very bright, young art critic recently explained to me why painters today have a basic problem of reception for their work: the most intelligent of her generation of art critics, she said, do not understand painting, they don't know how to read it, don't understand color."[14] (This is echoed in Currin's observation, quoted above, that the "culture" around painting is "dead.") Could a widespread inability of critics to look intelligently and knowledgeably at painting be part of the problem? It seemed like a plausible explanation, except that the problem wasn't just with critics. In the last few years there has been a much wider failure, a near-total breakdown, in the process of assessing painting—how else to explain the phenomenal success of an artist like Cecily Brown, who is presented as a painting virtuoso when she is a flashy but moderately skilled practitioner of a thoroughly academic form of expressionism? (And please don't speak

to me of her supposedly transgressive eroticism, which has all the subtlety of an orgy in a low-budget porn film.) Or the enthusiastic reception given to the wan, equivocating, strangely inconsequential canvases of Laura Owens? Or Gary Hume's jokey, ingratiating, quick-fix exercises in neo-Pop? How could the curator of the Artists Space show, Lauri Firstenberg, conclude that her lackluster choices were the best that New York had to offer? Looking back, I think the scale of the crisis first hit me when I noticed that Damien Hirst's visually and conceptually inert "Dot Paintings"—grids of circles in pleasant, randomly sequenced colors—were being taken seriously by American viewers and institutions. This was a sign that our expectations of painting had been drastically, even tragically reduced. It doesn't help the work that Hirst is absurdly deluded about the retinal qualities of his art: "I'm a fantastic phenomenal fucking colorist. It's like, I'm a Bonnard, a Turner, a Matisse."[15] Given that Brown, Hume and Hirst are English, it's perhaps also a sign of the deleterious effect of Brit Art on the American art scene—but that's another story, as are, I must add, Chris Ofili and Glenn Brown, a pair of quite good London-based painters.

New Genealogies

One thing that is sorely missing from the current realm of painting is a sense of genealogy, or, at any rate, a refreshed sense of historical development. Most of us seem to be carrying around in our heads some dusty, tattered schema based on Alfred Barr's famous 1936 diagram of Cubism and Abstract Art, grafted onto which are other lines and modules representing a half dozen movements from Abstract Expressionism to Neo-Geo. After the mid-1980s, the diagram metamorphoses into a cascade of individual manners, following each other in rapid sequence like calendar pages in an old Hollywood movie. As it gets closer to the present, the cascade speeds up and breaks apart, making it impossible even to keep track of changes on a strictly chronological basis. Confronted with a shattering of stylistic tendencies and a global proliferation of art scenes, and inheriting a skepticism about all universal judgments and a market-driven environment, it's no wonder that critics have largely gotten out of the business of making distinctions and value judgments, or limited themselves to issuing vague pronouncements such as the "return to beauty" that was widely heralded a few years back.

The common wisdom is that we should simply recognize this crowded artistic landscape as a consequence of the rhizomatic, multicultural, five-hundred-channel society in which we live; that critics should reconcile themselves to their marginalized and delegitimized status and accept the behavior of the art market as ultimately infallible much the same way laissez-faire economists would have us accept the gyrations of global markets. A dissenting view might hold that all cultural producers are not created equal, that individual voices can still wield significant influence, and that markets of all kinds are subject to manipulation and capable of inflicting catastrophic damage. What motivates my own dissatisfaction with the state of things are three interrelated convictions: that the current popularity of painting has unleashed a huge volume of mediocre art into galleries and museums, that many valuable painters are being overlooked or underappreciated, and that the practice of art criticism is in need of serious reinvigoration.

There are, however, some bright spots, if you know where to look for them. One of the most stimulating shows that I've seen recently was an exercise in innovative genealogy that explored connections between an often-overlooked European art movement of the late '60s and the work of some younger painters and sculptors. Titled "Prescient Then and Now: The Resonance of Support/Surface," the exhibition (at the nonprofit Dorsky Gallery in Long Island City) offered New York viewers the rare opportunity of seeing works from ca. 1970 by major French artists such as Claude Viallat, Noël Dolla, and Daniel Dezeuze. Favoring grid formats along with unstretched, often folded canvases and stained-in rather than brushed-on paint, the Supports/Surfaces artists (the group's name can be given as singular or plural; I prefer the latter) were driven equally by theoretical issues and tactile possibilities. Their work also made use of floors and ceilings, as well as walls. Louis Cane's *Toile Decoupée* (Cut-up Canvas), 1971, is an orange, blue, and yellow composition of rectangles of canvas that can either be push-pinned to the wall or stretched out on the floor like an abstract welcome mat (it's an unusual format that one finds in some works by Ellsworth Kelly and, less obviously, the young California painter Ingrid Calame). Dezeuze's *Ladder: Brown and Red*, 1974, employs different materials in a similar format: seventeen feet of supple, four-and-a-half-foot-wide wooden lattice, held together by staples and painted red and brown, begins high up on the wall and ends in a roll that sits on the floor. Viallat, Dolla, Patrick Saytour, and Jean-Pierre Pincemin were represented by more conventionally wall-hung canvases. While each was

grid-based and systemic, the works had the raw presence and defiant informality that characterized Supports/Surfaces.

As the show's curator, Saul Ostrow, points out in an accompanying brochure, Supports/Surfaces "has had little or no exposure on this side of the Atlantic." This meant that the relationship suggested with the younger U.S.-based artists in the show was one of affinity rather than influence. In some cases the connection was obvious, though nonetheless welcome for that: Apfelbaum's striped bedsheet with rows of dyed circles shared the off-the-stretcher, alternative-to-the-brush approach to painting favored by Supports/Surfaces. Similar affinities could be detected in James Hyde's wall relief made from artfully tangled nylon webbing and Stephen Dean's old wood-and-canvas cots, painted in monochrome colors and attached high on a wall. Also of interest was a layered, multimedium painting-assemblage by Ivelisse Jimenez, though aspects of it overlapped too neatly with territory that has been staked out by Diana Cooper. One of the strongest works in the show was by Edouard Prulhière, a French-born artist who has lived in New York for over a decade. His hybrid sculpture-painting, *Sex Was on Everyone's Lips*, 1995, involved several pour-and-splatter-covered, torn, folded canvases imprisoned in a nearly seven-foot-high cagelike wood structure. Surprisingly, Prulhière gets you to look intently at his beat-up and boxed-in abstractions, which suggest an unlikely collaboration between Sam Francis, Lucio Fontana, and Paul McCarthy.

A few months after "Prescient Then and Now" came another canon-expanding exhibition titled "No Greater Love: Abstraction" at Jack Tilton/Anna Kustera Gallery in SoHo. Consisting of abstract paintings by thirty-eight American artists (each participant was represented by a single work, of small to medium scale), the show mixed generations, decades, and widely varying degrees of renown. It also included a large number of African American artists. I'll bet that for many viewers the show was full of surprises in the form of intriguing works by artists they hadn't come across before. Among those new to me were Haywood "Bill" Rivers, Gerald Jackson, Peter Bradley, and James Little. It was also good to see paintings by established artists such as Hale Woodruff, Beauford Delaney, Al Loving, and Charles Alston, and a colored-tile floor piece by Louis Cameron.

As well as offering a fair number of good-to-great paintings, the show provided some effective juxtapositions. Next to a 1961 Hans Hofmann oil on board hung Ed Clark's *Untitled (New York Series)*, 2001, a sixty-eight-by-fifty-four-inch canvas on which the artist used a push broom

to create two broad, semi-circular swaths of orange, pink, brown, and green. Not far away on the same long wall was a sequence of paintings by Rivers, Agnes Martin, Cy Twombly, and Norman Lewis. While not stylistically close (though Twombly and Lewis share a relationship to calligraphy, and rectiliniar compositions are favored by Martin and Rivers, a Brooklyn-based artist and veteran of 1950s Paris who died in 2001), this quartet of paintings was compelling enough to set one dreaming of new paths through the history of twentieth-century American painting.

The most powerful grouping was of three superb canvases: Alma Thomas's *Red Scarlet Sage*, 1976, Stanley Whitney's *Wonder Luck,* 2000, and Kenneth Noland's *About 1959,* 1959. Again, this wasn't about matching styles, but rather about bringing together works by three great colorists. The Noland is an early twenty-four-inch-square target painting in which a black center is surrounded by loosely painted lines and bands of various reds, oranges, and blues over a green ground. The four-by-three-foot *Red Scarlet Sage* also employs a green ground, cooler in tone than Noland's, that Thomas filled with a field of closely packed, mosiac-like red shards, achieving the shimmering light and nuanced approach to allover composition and positive/negative shapes that characterizes her phenomenal late work. Between Thomas's mosaic and Noland's target was Whitney's larger rectangular painting with its four horizontal rows of variously sized blocks of color. The loose geometry suggests a kind of preindustrial masonry or fabric patterning, while the range of colors defies generalization. Using an assured, let's-get-the-job-done paint handling that nonetheless rewards careful study, Whitney impacts rectangles of light lemon yellow, indigo, ocher, cobalt blue, cadmium red, raw sienna, and chalky gray to create a tightly structured yet eternally restless painting.

Visually these three paintings made a dynamic group; as an art-historical proposition, their conjunction verged on the radical. Thomas is a superb painter who has yet to be accorded her rightful place in postwar abstraction; Whitney, who has been showing his paintings in the U.S. and Europe for about ten years and working for many more, is a worthy heir to Thomas and Noland (though his work probably owes just as much to Guston and post-Minimalism), but still little known; Noland, despite a general lack of interest in his recent work, is a long-established, widely collected figure. This is a trio I can't imagine any U.S. museum daring to assemble, despite the obvious connection to be

made between Thomas and Noland, both of whom were working in Washington, DC, in the 1950s and early 1960s. Does this have anything to do with the fact that Thomas and Whitney are black artists? Perhaps, but I suspect that it has more to do with the narrow, academic mindset that prevails in U.S. museums, from New York's MoMA to LA MoCA, with the limitations, both institutional and self-imposed, that most curators operate under.

The Tilton/Kustera show, like the exhibition at Dorsky, could be seen, then, as a challenge to museums to take more risks in their programming and collecting. These two shows also offered a pair of possible models for relating present and past and for looking beyond the usual suspects. (A pioneer in new ways of thinking about recent art history has been the New York dealer Mitchell Algus, who, for the last decade, has mounted many revisionist exhibitions, largely focused on overlooked artists who emerged in the 1960s and '70s.)

Just as I believe that I'm not alone in being worried about the state of art criticism, I also believe that there is an increasingly widespread desire to establish new genealogies. As proof, I'd cite events like last summer's group show "Something Anything" at Matthew Marks Gallery, in which the artist Nayland Blake gathered works by an eccentric roster of artists, young and old, living and dead, that suggested an alternative history of postwar art and a family tree for Blake's own work. The photographer Gregory Crewdson did something similar, though in a more thematically oriented form, in a show he curated at Luhring Augustine Gallery titled "American Standard." When Carter Ratcliff reviewed the exhibitions in *Art in America* (October 2002), he insisted that each show was best approached as nothing more than a "display of sensibility." While I appreciate Ratcliff's perceptive account of the shows, I think that they were more than exercises in connoisseurship: both artists were, in essence, arguing for the centrality and ubiquity of their concerns, as well as rendering homage to some precursors (there was also probably a bit of self-promotion involved, but not egregiously so.)

The Blake and Crewdson shows may mean that, in a critical and curatorial void, artists are increasingly taking matters into their own hands. Other recent instances of artists assuming curatorial authority are Takashi Murakami's traveling exhibition of contemporary Japanese art titled "Superflat," Carroll Dunham's "virtual exhibition" of artists that have influenced him in the October 2002 issue of *Artforum* and "Quiet As It's Kept," a show that was curated last summer by the artist David

Hammons at Christine Konig Galerie in Vienna. The latter exhibition, which unfortunately I did not see, brought together three generations of African American abstract painters as represented by Ed Clark, Stanley Whitney and Denyse Thomasos. An early instance of this phenomenon, and one that helped inspire this article, was a daring act by Shirley Kaneda, a painter known for her sensuous, light-and-pattern-filled, computer-aided, spatially nuanced abstractions. As viewers entered Feigen Contemporary in Chelsea to visit a winter 2001 show of Kaneda's paintings, they first passed through a gallery showing four canvases by other artists: Jo Baer, Shirley Jaffe, Frank Stella, and the late Nicholas Krushenick. In deciding to give over gallery space to these other artists, Kaneda accomplished several admirable things: she set the bar high for herself, in effect asking us to compare her with these four supremely accomplished painters; she sketched out a tradition for her own work and underlined the importance of artists reinterpreting art history; and she looked beyond market and museum hierarchies by bringing together both well-known and underrecognized artists. Kaneda also issued a challenge to any complacent critics and curators who came into the gallery: could they be as unbiased and original in their thinking about recent painting? Could they go out on a limb for their convictions? It's a challenge that, I'm sorry to say, is still largely unmet.

Notes

1. "On Art and Artists: Peter Schjeldahl," videotaped interview conducted by Robert Storr in 1982, transcript published in *The Hydrogen Jukebox: Selected Writings of Peter Schjeldahl* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p169.

2. Alex Katz, "Starting Out," *The New Criterion* (December 2002), p 7.

3. Holland Cotter, "Dana Schutz," *New York Times*, January 3, 2003, p E 42.

4. *The Visual Art Critic: A Survey of Art Critics at General-Interest News Publications in America* (New York: National Arts Journalism Program, Columbia University, 2002).

5. Christopher Knight, "Critic's Notebooks," *Los Angeles Times*, online edition, November 8, 2002.

6. Maurice Berger, "Introduction: The Crisis of Criticism," in *The Crisis of Criticism* (New York, The New Press, 1998), p 6.

7. Jerry Saltz, "Learning on the Job," *Village Voice*, September 11, 2002.

8. "Round Table: The Present Conditions of Art Criticism," *October*, 100 (Spring 2002), p 202. If art criticism is in a state of crisis, it's perhaps not a new situation. Here's a critic explaining one of the reasons he stopped writing about contemporary art: "What might be called evaluative criticism no longer mattered as it previously had. No longer was it read with the same interest, no longer could the critic imagine that his or her words might intervene in the contemporary situation in the way in which, perhaps delusively, I had sometimes imagined my words intervening in it, no longer were there critical reputations to be made by distinguishing the best art of one's time from the rest." The author is Michael Fried, writing in 1996, about what he was feeling in the late 1960s and early '70s. See Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997) p 15.

9. *The Visual Art Critic*, p 9.

10. Dave Hickey, "Mixology—an installation by Christine Siemens," exhibition brochure (New York), apexart, 1999).

11. Thomas McEvilley, *Art & Discontent: Theory at the Millenium* (Kingston, NY: McPherson & Co., 1991), p 177.

12. Arthur C. Danto, *The Madonna of the Future: Essays in a Pluralistic Art World* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000), p xiii.

13. *Vitamin P: New Perspectives in Painting*, (London: Phaidon, 2002), p 9. (I was one of the sixty-nine critics and curators invited to nominate artists for inclusion in this volume.)

14. Mira Schor,"Course Proposal," in *Wet: On Paintings, Feminism and Art Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), p 170.

15. Damien Hirst and Gordon Burn, *On the Way to Work*, (New York: Universe Publishing, 2002), p 69.

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Critical Mess

Does art criticism still matter? Are value judgments obsolete or indispensable? Do we live in a post-critical age? Is it legitimate to compare one artist to another? Do artists still listen to critics? Have influential curators marginalized their role? Has the booming art market made critical discourse irrelevant? Or is it a victim of a widespread loss of space for public discourse of any kind whatsoever?

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