



Faculty of Liberal Arts & Sciences

2013

Editorial: Issue 118: Criticism

Morrell, Amish

Suggested citation:

Morrell, Amish (2013) Editorial: Issue 118: Criticism. C: International Contemporary Art (118). p. 2. ISSN 1480-5472 Available at <http://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/1471/>

COPYRIGHT 2013 C The Visual Arts Foundation

Open Research is a publicly accessible, curated repository for the preservation and dissemination of scholarly and creative output of the OCAD University community. Material in Open Research is open access and made available via the consent of the author and/or rights holder on a non-exclusive basis.

The OCAD University Library is committed to accessibility as outlined in the [Ontario Human Rights Code](#) and the [Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act \(AODA\)](#) and is working to improve accessibility of the Open Research Repository collection. If you require an accessible version of a repository item contact us at repository@ocadu.ca.

by Amish Morrell

Editorial

One of the most glaringly obvious problems in much of contemporary art criticism is its stark lack of social and geographic diversity. As Editor of a magazine that purports to be both national *and* international in its scope and readership, by far the greatest number of proposals I receive are from major urban centres and propose covering major public art galleries and/or artists with significant commercial representation. It feels formulaic too—a writer interviews an artist who is already widely acclaimed or reviews a show at a venue that's known and trusted by other art-world insiders. Such artists and institutions are safe entities and the writing they seem to inspire could just as easily be a press release, anchoring the artist's work in ideas that simultaneously legitimize the artist and the writer while often failing to articulate how the work offers anything that hasn't already been tracked and mapped in critical discourse. In many cases, writers enact the very conditions of art as the form of spectacle and elite entertainment that they claim to critique. Both art and criticism should do much more.

For every hundred emails we receive proposing to review a show in Toronto or New York, we receive only a few that suggest covering a show in Ottawa or Victoria. And of all the proposals that we receive, most are for exhibitions at major institutions, like the Museum of Modern Art or the Art Gallery of Ontario. It's only a few times a year that we receive any proposals to cover an exhibition at a gallery outside of major urban centres, artists working from less central locations, or those who have carved out their own spaces outside of public galleries and artist-run centres. And comparatively few propose writing about new and emergent artists who haven't already been covered in the art press. Having chosen a line of work that is both grossly under-compensated and mercilessly competitive, art writers would do well to look beyond the well-worn paths of established practices. I suggest this not for the benefit of emergent artists, or artists who live in lesser known places, but as a necessary intervention into what we consider to be the role of contemporary art, and the kinds of experiences and subjectivities that it produces. This might further expand our

ability to embrace other experiences and our understanding of what it means to be part of contemporary society.

In April, in partnership with Halifax-based *Visual Arts News*, we held *The Atlantic Symposium: New Directions for Art Writing in Atlantic Canada*, which included a full day of sessions led by writers and editors from various regional, national, and international art magazines and newspapers, attended by writers and artists who live and work in Atlantic Canada. The objective was to find ways to better support and engage writers working in a region that's also home to many of Canada's most interesting artists—as well as important institutions and histories of artist culture—but which aren't widely covered in national or international publications. At the symposium, there were a number of topics raised that have significant bearing on this issue of *C Magazine*. Among them was the question of why art writers often don't write critically—a topic writer Richard William Hill took up in relation to contemporary Indigenous art, where the writing tends to be largely celebratory, thus resulting in a lack of critical engagement. Arguably, this problem extends to much of art writing. In her keynote lecture, editor and curator Sylvie Fortin took up the recurrent idea of the “crisis” in art criticism, arguing that despite its problems, criticism is live and well and noting that the very role of criticism is to *produce crisis*, as a way of challenging and intervening in established intellectual or social discourse. While there was much discussion about the different *places* where criticism can occur—newspapers, art magazines, and within the work of artists themselves, much attention still needs to be given to how we *perform criticism*, as well as to what forms of public engagement and what kinds of communities we enact through our practices.

Some of these ideas are among those taken up in this issue of *C Magazine*. Ben Davis dissects three different crises that most frequently arise in relation to contemporary art, suggesting a way of moving beyond some of these sticking points. Stephen Horne presents an idea of “doing”—in contrast to “waiting” or “making”—as a way of describing how critical practice exists through a space of play. Charlene Lau tackles the broader neoliberal context of con-

temporary art practice and art writing through phenomena such as the Top 10 list, addressing how critics risk collusion with the market, and undermine criticality itself. Peta Rake turns towards how we *read criticism*, surveying a number of artist projects that take critical writing as their content, sometimes redacting or commenting on it and translating the reading process into new material and textual objects. Also addressing the theme of the issue, Sky Goodden interviews Dave Hickey, who delivered the 2013 Shenkman Lecture at the University of Guelph. In their conversation, Goodden and Hickey discuss some of Hickey's thoughts on art education and art criticism—and his experience at Guelph. Ostensibly delivering a critique of post-secondary art education as part of his lecture, in his deliberately provocative style, Hickey made many derisive comments targeting everyone from women students, people with mental disabilities to universities that have cows on their campuses. While these comments might be read as a performance of forms of intolerance that persist in many parts of the art world and consequently shape aesthetic judgment and artistic success, by masquerading as institutional critique they effectively legitimate these attitudes. Consequently, his lecture polarized his audience between those who were entertained, and perhaps affirmed by his lecture and those unable to dismiss the gravity of many of his comments. It is important to consider Goodden's interview in this context.

Presenting still other models for producing or performing art criticism, this issue includes Charmaine Wheatley's “The Painting is Better,” an article-as-watercolour painting based on conversations she had with Newfoundland painter Mary Pratt. Here, photographs are translated into paintings, which are translated again by hand into words and yet more paintings. And using means that are entirely automated, Dave Dyment ran the content of this issue through a word analysis program, as a way of visualizing the language of writing about art criticism. The words that appear most often are illustrated in the centrefold, scaled according to their relative frequency. Both of these projects call out for new ways of doing art criticism that diverge from established practices. ×