Arts & Humanities

Still Life with Critic

On a broad canvas, Jed Perl finds figures in the shadows.

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New Art City, Jed Perl's recent book about New York's postwar art scene, has generated both enthusiasm and not a little outrage among critics and reviewers.

Earlier this year, the 92nd Street Y hosted a discussion on New Art City with Perl '72CC, who is *The New Republic*'s art critic, and Leon Wieseltier '74CC, TNR's literary editor. We are pleased to present excerpts, edited for *Columbia Magazine*.

LEON WIESELTIER: I've known Jed since we were in Meyer Schapiro's seminar on the sociology of art at Columbia in the fall of 1971.

New Art City is a beautiful and brilliant book, essentially a counterhistory, written to go against the grain of the official history of art in Manhattan and in America in the postwar period. This book is written in defiance of that narrative. Its purpose is to thicken it, to revise it by introducing into the story unjustly or even criminally neglected figures and by discovering new connections between things that were previously deemed to have been unconnected.

Could you talk a little bit about your complaint with the official version?

JED PERL: I started adult life as a painter in the early 1970s. And I got to know a lot of artists who I believed were doing enormously important work but who were little known or not known at all in the wider art world. I found this very disturbing. And I began to believe, as did many of my artist friends at the time, that there were two art worlds: an official art world that was focused on a few mainstream trends, which at that time were minimalism and the beginnings of conceptualism, and another art world, what my friends and I came to call, half jokingly, the "real art world." Even when artists in this other art world were written about in the art magazines, they were generally regarded as special cases. I'm thinking of people like the

representational painters Fairfield Porter, Leland Bell, Lennart Anderson, and Nell Blaine, or the abstract painter Burgoyne Diller. Even when they were considered — even when they were admired — they were regarded as being off somewhere to the side. They were not part of a story that had any kind of coherence.

In the 1970s, while I was putting a lot of energy into my work as a painter, I began writing criticism. And in the criticism I aimed to talk seriously about some of these artists who were constantly being marginalized. In a sense the origins of New Art City are in those years when I was first working as a critic. Because the more that I wrote about some of these people, and by the late ’70s I was writing about some of my contemporaries as well, the more disturbed I became. I realized that even if one celebrated an artist like Louisa Matthiasdottir, who is probably the finest still-life painter of the last 50 years, it was a celebration in isolation. So the question that haunted me was how to put these people into a story of midcentury American art that was more inclusive, that included both the figures who were traditionally regarded as mainstream and the ones who were regarded as marginal, if they were regarded at all.

It took years for me to figure out how to write this book, and one of the things that happened during those years, and that enabled me to finally create the broad canvas that is *New Art City,* was that I became less and less satisfied with what I would call the top-ten experience of the arts. I became fed up with the idea that there are only a few artists in any time who really matter. Although that’s an idea that can feel exhilarating when you’re young and you’re hungry for absolutes, it’s an idea that I find less interesting the longer I live.

LW: It makes you feel you’ve mastered more than you really have.

JP: That’s part of it. The approach becomes a kind of crutch. I think sometimes that the people for whom the top-ten approach is most appealing are the people who are most insecure in their taste. Because if there are just the ten greats, then that’s easy to deal with. But when you really have a deep experience of the arts, you may find that some things touch you to the bottom of your being at a certain point, and five years later something else may touch you that deeply.

I’m not saying there is no such thing as standards or quality. But the standards, the sense of quality is very complicated, and we respond very subtly, very humanly.

LW: There are certain institutions of American cultural life that require this list of masters. One of them, of course, is journalism, and the other is the art market.

JP: The situation in the art market right now is very strange. People are paying a quarter of a million dollars or more for brand-new things, for work that nobody has really had time to look at, much less absorb.

LW: Not just brand-new things, *bad* brand-new things.

JP: Even if they were very good new things, there's a rush to judgement involved in the huge prices that tends to foreclose experience. A value has been placed on a new work of art before anybody has really had a chance to understand what they feel about it.

LW: It's also very bad for the artist. It's a curse for young writers or young artists to have *The New York Times* all over them in their early twenties. We've reached the point where obscurity is the real virginity; you don't give it away easily because you can toil well and seriously with the protection of obscurity. At least I see this in the literary world.

JP: It's even more extreme in the art world. In the literary world, a writer can get a substantial advance, and then the public buys or doesn't buy the book for $20 or $30. There's no great loss if you buy the book and find that you don't like it. But in the contemporary-art market, you may have 100 or 150 people who are ready to pay a quarter of a million to a million or two million dollars for a new work by a new artist. These are not trivial amounts of money, even for the very wealthy. And these same people who are collecting the new art are sitting on the museum acquisitions committees and boards of trustees. And let's face it: they have an interest in protecting their investment, which the person who buys a novel for $25 doesn't. It's a different level of commitment for the person who spent $1 million for a Jeff Koons.

LW: One of the things about this book that I find so valuable is the way in which you resuscitate certain people. Some of the most moving pages are about a man I had never heard of before: Earl Kerkam. Your discussion of him made me ashamed of that at some level. You make a really persuasive case for the genuine aesthetic and historical significance of Earl Kerkam.

JP: Earl Kerkam was born in 1891, lived in Philadelphia, and worked as a commercial artist, made posters for Warner Brothers. Somewhere in his forties he had a

yearning to embrace painting seriously, so he took his family off to Paris. Eventually, his wife and son returned to Philadelphia, while he went to New York and got to know a lot of artists. Although he left his family, he and his son remained very connected, and the son carried the torch for Kerkam long after the artist died in 1965.

Kerkam began by painting nudes in what you'd call a loose, School of Paris way, but with a dark gravitas that was very, very personal. His paintings from the 1940s of men and women have some of the mood that you see in certain of the melancholy de Koonings of that period. Kerkam just kept at it. He was a figure in the world of the Cedar Tavern. He lived very simply, buying his clothes at thrift shops. He was admired by Pollock, and Franz Kline was a close friend of his. Kerkam ended up showing at places like Charles Egan, where many of the abstract expressionists showed, and then at the end of his life he was showing at the wonderful World House Gallery, which also had a great Morandi show that did so much to solidify Morandi's reputation in America.

Kerkam experimented. There was a period when he did sort of cubified, almost cubist, images reminiscent of the work of Jacques Villon. Some of the last works are very small still lifes and flower pieces, with rich, jewel-like color. There's a New York–twilight quality about a lot of Kerkam's work, but with touches of very strong color. In the 1980s, his work was still being shown in New York, especially at the Zabriskie Gallery, but after that he pretty much disappeared.

How big is Kerkam? I think at this point we don't know, because there's nowhere you can go and look at a Kerkam, and then go back a month later and test your reaction.

LW: What matters is not how big he is but how true he is, and the kind of experience that you undergo when you're confronted with a picture by such a painter.

JP: Right. And there is force about his work. There's something gruff and straightforward about it, but then there's a lyric strain to it. He did a lot of self-portraits, but he said somewhere, "Well, it's a self-portrait, but it's also Everyman." There was a kind of New York poetry of anonymity about his work.

Kerkam was a painter of enormous richness, with a strange poetry. There's an extraordinary weight and force to the work, and he was written about by marvelous critics and observers at the time.

LW: What should be the place of an art critic?

JP: The role of an art critic is like the role of any critic. After you experience a work of art, it's natural to want to talk about it. People leave a movie and talk about it. My view of an art critic, of any critic, is that he or she is a person who conducts that conversation in public. I really believe that.

One of the marks of a marvelous critic is that you read the work regularly and sometimes you say, "I disagree totally." But the first-rate critics, even when you disagree with them, manage to make comprehensible what they're responding to. You understand their thinking, and as you read you're responding not only to the work but to their thinking about the work. That's the kind of criticism I responded to when I was younger. Many of the critics who meant the most to me and from whom I learned to write criticism were not art critics at all. I'm thinking especially of Edmund Wilson and Pauline Kael, two very different writers who both had a tremendous impact on me when I was in my twenties.

When you look at some of the greatest criticism of the midcentury period, much of it was done — again, not just art criticism, but also literary criticism — for relatively small-circulation publications. I'm thinking of work by Randall Jarrell, Lionel Trilling, Clement Greenberg, Edwin Denby, to name a few. Paradoxically, I think the relatively small size of the audience that some of these people wrote for freed them from the sometimes stultifying task of being public tastemakers. I think they felt as if they were mostly talking to their friends, and that enabled them to really engage in a heated, impassioned, lucid conversation with their readers. A problem arises when you write the day after the show opens — for, say, The New York Times — and what you say actually affects whether the show is going to survive or not. I think it's dangerous for a critic to have too much power. Because then you're not a person writing about a subject you love, you're an arbiter, and that's something else again.

LW: I think that if a critic discovers a book or a show that he finds pernicious, it is his solemn responsibility to try to do as much damage to the fortunes of that as he possibly can.

JP: Totally. But the damage needs to be deep damage. It has to be damage that has an intellectual complexity to it. It's not the kind of damage necessarily that knocks a book or a show out that day. It's the kind of damage that even people who totally disagree are worrying about six months and six years later.

LW: I've always found that the really valuable attacks by critics only look like attacks. In fact, they're defenses of things the critic believes have been attacked. They are responses to attacks.

JP: One of the things people forget or simply don't understand is that the hardest thing a critic can do is write an extended attack on something you really and truly don't like. It is awful to do. It's hard. Very, very difficult. You have to think about the people you don't agree with and what they think. You have to get into their minds. You have to develop arguments that are compelling. It's not fun. It's much more fun to celebrate.

LW: I think that's true, but there's a lot of very empty praise out there — to the point where there are very few critics of any art form that I would trust about buying a book or going to see a ballet. Too many people are nice to too many people.

JP: That's completely true, which means that it's all the more important, when one wants to praise something, to praise it in a complex, substantial way. I'm not against attacks. I've done my share.

But one of the central obligations of the critic is to develop, over a period of time, a kind of verbal authenticity. I'm talking about a critical voice that tells the reader who this human being, who this critic, really is, who has lived all these things and experienced them and looked and felt. Then even readers who are hesitant to accept what you're saying can begin to get involved.

LW: I think that's right. I think the important point is for the reader to recognize that when an attack is made, it's not simply an attack for the sheer delight of it or to damage the reputation, but that there's an idea at stake. Whenever there's an idea at stake, then a philosophical issue is being joined. Then it is no longer an attack on something but a continuation of a philosophical discussion about something, something real.

JP: One of the things that makes me happiest is when I praise something or attack something and somebody who does not agree with me at all says, "I didn't agree, but I thought the argument was sound, and I went the distance with it." Again, it can sound a little Pollyannaish to say we need a conversation, but I'm talking about a conversation that's about real feelings and real qualities and real standards.

LW: Do you think that the predicament of a painter in New York today can in some sense be analogized to the predicament of the artists who were living and painting in New York in the 1950s, in the sense that they see a lot of rubbish being officially recognized, they see a lot of rich people spending money on a lot of bad stuff, and they depend on each other for artistic and moral support?

JP: In a way I think the situation now in New York is probably closer to the situation in Paris 100 years ago than to the immediate postwar situation in New York. People forget that an art student could have gone to Paris in 1900 and never heard of Cézanne. He could have been there for years and never have heard of him. That was because Paris was not only the center of the most adventurous and marvelous art, it was also the center of the art market, of a very powerful, entrenched, fossilized art establishment.

I think something analogous can happen in New York today, where an art student could spend several years and never hear about a major painter like Louisa Matthiasdottir. One of the saving graces of the situation in the late 1940s and ’50s was that the whole art world, including the art market, was not centered here. In a sense there was less at stake in New York. Now there is this weight on top of artists, this weight that comes from the market, from the auction houses. And as we said earlier, the big collectors who are so caught up in the art market also shape museum policy, and I frankly doubt that the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney are going to liberate themselves from the market pressures anytime soon. The question I ask is, Where is the next Chick Austin, the adventuresome director of the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford in the 1930s, who bought work by Mondrian and Balthus practically before anybody else? One hopeful sign is that we are seeing some increasingly independent thinking in the acquisition and exhibition policies at some of the smaller university and college galleries. There’s a whole group of college galleries and museums that have shows of contemporary artists who have been unjustly overlooked or ignored, including some of the people I’ve written about.

We need a new system of collectors and curators, people with a little bit of money who can start creating a sort of countersystem of collecting. Much of the best art of the last few years is not going into museum collections or is going into collections to a very limited degree. That’s scary. Because at least if something’s in the basement of a museum, you know it’s there. It can be rediscovered.

LW: What do you think of the gigantism in the museum system?

JP: The building boom in museums is incredible and horrible. There is a problem with museums and cultural institutions in general when they feel that the only way to really generate excitement is by constructing some elaborate new building, generally designed by one of a half-dozen hot architects. It's upsetting that even the great small museums feel the need to go this route. So the Morgan Library, the Frick, the Phillips in Washington, the Gardner in Boston are all building additions. You get these press releases from small, jewel-like museums, explaining that they need to change and grow, and you're left wondering why they need to change and grow when they already offer the perfect museum-going experience. There's a kind of homogenization going on. As a kid, I'd wander into places like the Morgan Library, and it was as if I'd wandered into another universe. There should at least be some places that are left like that.

I visited the Phillips a few years ago, and someone in the press office said, "People are discovering the Phillips Collection." I didn't know what to say. People always knew about the Phillips Collection. Kids who loved art in Washington were going to the Phillips in the 1930s.

This goes back to the populism question. The things I'm saying are often called elitist, but I don't think that's true. One of my beliefs about a great democracy is that you have all kinds of rare, special things, like the Gardner in Boston, where you can look at one of the greatest Titians, or the Morgan Library. In a great democracy, those marvelously rich experiences are available to anybody. In a good school system, kids will be brought there. And maybe one kid in every class — his or her parents may have taken that child to a museum — will be hooked. The special quality of smaller institutions like the Frick and the Phillips is that they give you the rare experience of feeling that you're alone with a great painting, almost as if you owned it. I think that's being ruined.

LW: Some of what you're talking about is the loss of the idea that the experience of a work of art should be an intimate one.

JP: A lot of the people who give money to museums are now corporate or government funders. They want to know how many people came to see the work or exhibition they sponsored. And it's very difficult to say to them, "Well, there were very few people who came, but among those few people was an adolescent who sat there rapt in front of a Picasso for an hour."
One of the central problems that we now have with museums is very similar to one

of the problems that we're having in the public libraries. If a book hasn't been taken out for a number of years, there's a tendency to deaccession it. But you should have all of Dickens on the shelf because some kid is going to come in, read the first one, and then want to read the rest.

LW: The only museum that gets it right in a big way is the Metropolitan. Someone told me that 460,000 people saw the Van Gogh drawings show. And to think, none of them was pandered to.

JP: The Metropolitan is terrific, a grand institution that's willing to take risks. One example of their high-minded risk-taking is the great Renaissance tapestry exhibition held a few years ago. People at other major museums, museums that explored the possibility of a Renaissance tapestry show but abandoned it as impossible to fund, have asked me, "How did Philippe de Montebello," the longtime director of the Metropolitan, "pull this off?" No museum was willing to put the money up for a Renaissance tapestry show because nobody had ever done it, and therefore there was no way to demonstrate that it would be cost-efficient. But at the Met you had a director, de Montebello, who had a curator whom he respected who wanted to do this show. So de Montebello simply went to the group of wealthy supporters who respect the work that he does — I'm speculating, but this is suggestive of the process — and he said, "I need another $300,000 for this," or whatever the amount was. And he got it.

Cultural authority is something we need more of. The great museum people — Alfred Barr or William Rubin at the Modern — were men who could go to William Paley, the head of CBS, who was a tough-as-nails guy, and say, "Bill, the museum needs this much more money because we need to buy this or do that." And Paley would say, "OK." He responded that way to Barr or Rubin because they had cultural authority. But if you talk to museum people today, with the exception of de Montebello, they're afraid to assert their cultural authority. Many of them don't even know any longer what cultural authority is.

Our thanks to the 92nd Street Y for its help with this piece.

Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >