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Letter To The Editor: *The Brooklyn Rail*

To the Editor of *The Brooklyn Rail*:

Thank you for your continued dedication to fostering critical conversations about art, culture, and society.

The Brooklyn Rail remains one of the few platforms where art criticism attempts to engage with intellectual rigor and depth. As a reader and advertiser in the publication, I'd like to share observations about its art criticism and failure to adapt to evolving tools.

Jeff Poe, the legendary Los Angeles gallerist of *Blum and Poe*, recently declared in *The Baer Faxt Podcast*, "*Criticism is out the door. Nobody gives a shit or reads it.*"

These words are not merely an observation but an honest testament by a veteran and respected gallerist pronounced over the past and current state of art criticism, a field that has devolved into a recursive cycle of self-indulgence and irrelevance. And yet, *The Brooklyn Rail* persists—publishing thousands of words, dozens of interviews, and sprawling videos that often fall short of meaningful engagement.

Suppose you think Poe's recent admission is a contemporary bias. How about this: When artist Carl Andre was asked what he thought of all the critical theorizing over Minimalism back in its heyday, he replied cheerfully, "*I thought that was nothing but bullshit.*"

If we step further back, Leo Steinberg, one of the era's most trailblazing and insightful art historians, dismissed the most dominant art critic of the time with characteristic precision: "*Clement Greenberg was wrong on every count.*"

Ironically, Andre and Steinberg were recently featured in *The Brooklyn Rail's* pages and *New Social Environment*.

Finally, Édouard Manet, one of modern art's founding figures and a contemporary of the first modern art critics, dismissed their newfound industry and authority with sharp retorts like, "*What do you say to that?*"—challenging critics to engage with his art on its terms rather than forcing it into their preconceived notions.

The question is simple: If nobody reads art criticism, except those wanting to read their names, i.e., the "*stupid artists*," as Duchamp called them all, then what purpose does art criticism serve?

This letter aims to share the root failures of contemporary art criticism as exemplified by *The Brooklyn Rail*, expose its structural, artistic, and intellectual deficiencies, and propose two clear solutions: embrace AI-generated content or submit to AI pre-publication review.

The State of Art Criticism: A Hollow Exercise

Jeff Poe's assessment is blunt but undeniable: Criticism no longer shapes art discourse; its irrelevance is deeply systemic. Marcel Duchamp's infamous quip, "*Stupid as a painter*," captures the futility of art criticism trying to engage with an audience that largely dismisses or outright meaningfully ignores their reflection.

Dave Hickey, one of the last great public intellectuals in the art world, albeit a rebel and outsider, diagnosed

art criticism's systemic failure—it *no longer serves audiences or art itself*. Instead, it functions as a transactional tool for artists' careers. Most—if not all—art criticism today serves only one purpose: providing artists with an ostensibly authoritative résumé line to secure a free lunch for a week or two. Tellingly, despite his decades-long teaching career at UNLV, his TLS-reviewed books, and his MacArthur Genius Award—Hickey failed to produce one single artist of merit.

If art criticism serves no audience and fails even as an intellectual exercise, why does it persist?

The Writers Behind Bad Criticism

Examining the current landscape of art criticism reveals a troubling trend of self-proclaimed professionals who have not found success in their primary creative pursuits. This is a horrible way to make a living. Will Self, an actual celebrated British writer, openly admits to producing meaningless catalogue essays to supplement his income, essays that serve more as filler than assessment.

Self is an actual bona-fide, widely regarded, and respected writer. He has written multiple books on philosophy, literature, and cultural theory, which have been translated into several languages. His work has been published in numerous journals and publications and is widely cited in academic and intellectual circles. His debut short-story collection, *The Quantity Theory of Insanity* (1991), won the *Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize*, and his 2002 novel *Dorian, an Imitation* was longlisted for the *Booker Prize*, while his 2012 novel *Umbrella* was shortlisted. He has appeared on the BBC and other international media outlets and given lectures and talks at universities and intellectual conferences worldwide. He is recognized as a leading voice in contemporary literature and international intellectual circles. Yet, Self admits both the art he wrote about and his writing were hollow. This mutual hollowness—where bad art meets lousy writing—isn't just an accident; it's structural.

This begs a fundamental question: Why do these writers persist in producing such pseudo-intellectual drivel? Are they trying to impress Duchamp's "stupid artists"? Good luck. Are they seeking validation from fellow refugees of failed pursuits or pensioned gate-keepers dispensing meal tickets? As great artists know, "*Failure is not a dead end, it is an emancipatory pathway*"—but these writers seem hell-bent on tripling-down, to fail at art criticism while poisoning the field, too, along the way. Given that virtually no one reads these texts, as Poe notes,

the disturbing pathology behind this public self-humiliation deserves examination—but that's perhaps a discussion for another time.

Dean Kissick's well-worn analysis, recently appearing in *Harper's*, diagnoses this systemic failure, showing how contemporary art has aligned itself with dominant discourses, becoming a performative exercise dressed up as protest. Art has devolved from a space of discursive polyphony into a narrow field where so-called 'theory' supersedes genuine artistic merit.

Parallel to Kissick's analysis, Jason Farago's *New York Times* piece—two decades late by my reckoning—further illuminates this cultural stagnation, describing our era as arguably the least innovative in 500 years of artistic production.

Both critics point to a fundamental problem: Art and art criticism prioritize market success and messaging over aesthetic innovation and transformative work.

Perhaps art and art criticism are trapped in a cycle where messaging overshadows aesthetic innovation, systematically marginalizing challenging work and rewarding mediocrity. Whatever the reason: Today, most art and most art criticism *sucks*—that is the 99%.

"We're in a situation where that which is marketable is not serious, and that which is serious is not marketable. That's stupid."

Stupid is as stupid does: 'Critics' are financially and professionally incentivized, as Self noted, to perpetuate mediocrity rather than challenge it. The result is not merely bad art or lousy criticism but a comprehensive art world that has lost its capacity for genuine reflection, analysis, and, thus, innovation. This systemic failure demands that we reassess the fundamental purpose of criticism.

The Purpose of Art Criticism: Hierarchy and Differentiation

At its core, art criticism, as Benjamin Buchloh, the former *Andrew W. Mellon Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art* at Harvard University, writes, must embrace "*the violence of aesthetic differentiation and exclusion as being constitutive of the very definition of aesthetic experience*." Effective art criticism requires intellectual-artistic rigor plus the courage to offer uncompromising analysis. Critics must become judges, jurors, executioners, and undertakers.

Differentiation and hierarchy are the essential pillars of criticism. Duchamp rejected the superficial; Buchloh demands we reject the mediocre, too.

The critic must distinguish the exceptional from the middling and elevate only the best while unapologetically discarding the rest. Instead of embracing their role as arbiters of taste and meaning—without regard for their *community*, lifestyle, health, and well-being—today's critics hide behind jargon, self-indulgent verbosity, and performative analyses. Without differentiation and hierarchy, aesthetic experience loses all meaning.

BR Case Study I: The Andrew Woolbright Interview (Pre-AI Era)

The absurdity of today's contemporary criticism is exemplified by Andrew Woolbright's text published in *The Brooklyn Rail* (Art, In Conversation with Oscar Yi Hou, July-August 2023). You might not remember this text, but you may remember my full-page advertisement in *The Brooklyn Rail*, which strikingly called out this absurdity. See: LG Williams, *Pick Your Preferred Post-Critical Platitudes*, October 2023.

Woolbright's text spans 6,987 words and references 14 main categories, 135 subcategories, and 22 distinct names, totaling around 171 topics. One topic is mentioned for every 40.86 words.

To achieve even an advanced intermediate level of competency across all 171 topics would require—your average run-of-the-mill, part-time 'critic'—approximately 820.8 years (factoring a 30% reduction for overlap), assuming a realistic study commitment of 5 hours per week and factoring in life's interruptions. If split evenly between two people, as in this conversation, the burden would theoretically drop to 410.4 years per person—a staggering undertaking, but at least a shared one.

Mastering all 171 topics in a lifetime would require sacrificing a balanced life. Instead, such an ambitious intellectual journey would demand monastic devotion or a strategic focus on select, essential topics to make the pursuit achievable and impactful.

In other words, no ordinary reader—let alone the author—could meaningfully navigate this convoluted textual wasteland. The interview prioritizes *poshlust*—a veneer of false sophistication—over genuine insight, exemplifying the limits of pre-AI art criticism and its reliance on obfuscation over meaningful engagement.

This issue extends beyond art criticism; the scientific community also faces a flood of low-quality papers driven by a system prioritizing volume over meaningful contributions.

Researchers like John Ioannidis have argued that this distorts the scientific record and artificially inflates

publication metrics. The practice of *paper farming*, where academics and institutions produce large numbers of papers primarily to increase output volume—has become widespread across disciplines.

A 2019 study published in *Nature* found that up to 50% of scientific papers in some fields may be *zombie papers* that are rarely cited. This highlights the urgent need for a more nuanced approach to evaluating research—prioritizing quality and relevance over mere volume.

"Zombie" is the operative word. *Zombie art* and *zombie writing*—or *zombie writing* and *Zombie art*? Who is leading whom to oblivion? Wait a minute—the merry couple are slouching toward irrelevance hand-in-hand.

Marcel Duchamp was well aware of *Zombie Art*. His critique of *retinal art* remains one of his most significant observations.

At 25, Duchamp rejected almost all of the art of his time as superficial decoration—that is, "*filling up space*" with whatever, however, and whyever—with vacuous images or words. During his involvement with Cubism, Duchamp's conscious break from *retinal art* began around 1912, shortly after completing his painting *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*.

This insight transformed art forever, and every contemporary artist owes him a debt of gratitude—though few today dare to abide by this precept.

When writer Gore Vidal was invited to join the *American Academy of Arts and Letters*, he quipped that he already belonged to the *Diners Club*. We need more of these kinds of writers and artists, but instead, as of today, *The Brooklyn Rail* has given us more superficial, self-serving criticism. These patterns of *zombie writing* continue to manifest in current criticism, as evidenced by the following example.

BR Case Study II: December 2024 Essay (Post-AI Era)

A recent December 2024 text in *The Brooklyn Rail* chosen at random demonstrates that the problem persists even in the AI-era. Here is the AI evaluation of this text, which nailed it:

"This essay reeks of mediocrity, cloaked in the guise of intellectual rigor. It rehashes tired debates about AI's role, social media's grip, and the commodification of art without delivering a single original thought. The writing is polished but calculated—like an AI-generated critique optimized for superficial coherence rather than depth. The irony is glaring: the essay itself embodies the very shallowness it critiques."

There's no spark to challenge the reader, no attempt to reshape our understanding of art's current dilemmas. Instead, it plays it safe, stitching together familiar observations into a tidy but uninspired package. This is 'pandering criticism' as flat as the digital screens it critiques—competent yet lifeless. If this is the standard for contemporary art discourse, perhaps the AI revolution has already begun, and we're too comfortably numb to notice."

What is most remarkable about this particular text compared to Woolbright's is that *it stuffed* 102 distinct topics (15 categories, 40 subcategories, 31 names, and 10 concepts) into 2,594 words. It averages one category per 25.43 words and is 1.61 times more referentially dense than the previous example. Let's hope this single author has a lot of friends willing to chip in on the 13 centuries of reading required to digest these references properly.

Philosopher Harry Frankfurt, in his seminal work *On Bullshit*, reminds us that bullshit isn't about lying—it's about indifference to the truth. In writing, this often manifests as a dazzling flurry of references, gibberish, and name-dropping that creates an *illusion of profundity* without genuine insight. Writing risks becoming a *reference salad*—a dense tangle of names and academic guff piled on without a clear purpose.

Such hyperbole—witting or unwitting—feels misplaced in today's art world, especially in the prestigious *Brooklyn Rail*.

The irony is undeniable: while human critics write bloated essays filled with unnecessary name-dropping

and theory-mongering, AI exposes their superficiality almost instantly.

Consider carefully: Who is truly hallucinating now?

These critics generate an *illusion of meaning* through *reference farming*—a textual hallucination more egregious than any AI could produce.

Conclusion

The Brooklyn Rail has two clear paths forward: Embrace the future: Either reduce your writing staff to a single technician generating AI-assisted content—more cost-effective without compromising quality as demonstrated from the evidence above—or retrofit nostalgia: submit all articles to AI pre-publication analysis to eliminate senselessness and fatuous weaknesses.

Reclaim your authority in the pursuit of the most rarefied aesthetic experiences. Embrace the violence of aesthetic differentiation and exclusion as your guiding principle. In doing so, *The Brooklyn Rail* could become relevant and indispensable.

Sincerely,

LG Williams

Hidden Hills, California

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