



The Art of Art Writing

“What it Means to Write About Art features conversations with writers who average three decades of experience turning phrases that go to press with a bold, uninhibited passion for art.” Matt Hanson reviews Jarrett Earnest’s recent book, a collection of interviews with prominent art writers such as Jerry Saltz, Roberta Smith, Lucy Lippard, Rosalind Krauss, and Yve Alain Bois.

Review / Matt Hanson June 28, 2019

Jarrett Earnest, *What it Means to Write About Art: Interviews with Art Critics*, New York: David Zwirner Books, 2018, 560 pp.

The quintessential New York art critic and public figure Jerry Saltz admired the 30-year-old artist and writer Jarrett Earnest, simply because he was brave enough to approach him. Saltz is famed as the “folk critic” for popularizing his larger-than-life personality in words. The authenticity of his vulnerable prose informed by a lifetime of art appreciation earned him the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism in 2018, for his article, “My Life as a Failed Artist” (2017), which appeared in *Vulture*, the entertainment site of *New York* magazine, where he is a senior writer.

“I don’t know how you’ve done it as a young guy, meeting all these really famous people” (394), he told Earnest, who was then gathering material for the 560-page collection of interviews, *What it Means to Write About Art* (2018), a sprawling oral historiographic survey of some of the most defining voices in the business of writing about art. Saltz, a bon vivant who married into the art circles that won him prestige, went on to confess that he still feared famous people.

Untitled-1.jpg



What it Means to Write About Art

Interviews with art critics
by Jarrett Earnest

Cover of Jarrett Earnest's *What it Means to Write About Art: Interviews with Art Critics*, ^[1]



New York: David Zwirner Books, 2018

Earnest, in contrast, was undaunted, as the two intellectuals sparred in print like a champion and his challenger at a title match. But instead of posturing a passive aggressive show of one-upmanship, they finished each other's sentences like comrades on the virtual battlefield of the mind. They reference early traces of art writing in classics of 18th-century European literature, for example, "An Essay on Criticism" (1711) by Alexander Pope. In a moment of well-played wit, Earnest jokes that Pope's book, "The Rape of the Lock" (1712) tells the story of his life. They laugh, and agree that the old master's *Iliad* translation is their favorite.

Saltz married [Roberta Smith](#) [2] in 1992 before moving into an apartment together in Greenwich Village that doubled as their writing studio seven days a week. Smith is the first woman to hold the position as chief art critic at the New York Times. Mirroring legendary writing duos like Joan Didion and John Gregory Dunne, they were a match made in print. "When Jerry was first writing, he'd write a few paragraphs and get stuck. I would ask, What does the reader need to know next?" Smith told Earnest, impressing the importance of the elephant in the room for every writer, i.e. the reader. "The main thing I'm trying to do is get people out of the house to look at art, to open themselves to it, so they can learn things about themselves and about the world" (475).

[A conversation with Roberta Smith and Jerry Saltz](#) [3]

Video of A conversation with Roberta Smith and Jerry Saltz

שיחה בהשתתפות רוברטה סמית' וג'רי סלץ, מוזיאון Kunsthistorisches, וינה. וידאו: ברברה שוורטפירר

[Criticism in the Expanded Field: Roberta Smith in Conversation with Isabelle Graw](#) [4]

Video of Criticism in the Expanded Field: Roberta Smith in Conversation with Isabelle Graw

ביקורת בשדה מורחב: רוברטה סמית' בשיחה עם איזבל גראו, האקדמיה האמריקנית בברלין

What it Means to Write About Art spans 30 interviews, featuring conversations with writers who average three decades of experience turning phrases that go to press with a bold, uninhibited passion for art. They have seen through its changing forms as the raw visual source from which to generate what literary knack they spent lifetimes developing from the ground up, out of the thin air of experiential description born of direct perception.

In his interview with Earnest, the art historian and poet Michael Fried, whose critique of minimalism in his text, "[Art and Objecthood](#) [5]" (1967) continues to influence contemporary criticism, has defined art writing without mincing words: "There's no seam between what is called 'description' and



what is called ‘interpretation.’ You start saying what this thing looks like, and before you know it there’s significance leaking out of every sentence, and you’re going somewhere” (170). Art writers are writers, and art writing, writing. *What it Means to Write About Art* defends art writing as a literary form, while retaining a critical eye so as not to misconstrue and inflate its role.

Earnest is an intrepid practitioner of art writing. He is an art educator, having served on the faculty at the free experimental art school [Bruce High Quality Foundation University](#) [6] (BHQFU), in New York and Miami from 2014-2017. He is also a contributor to *Art in America* and has edited important volumes, including a previous collection of interviews for *The Brooklyn Rail* he co-edited, titled “[Tell Me Something Good](#) [7]” (2017), also published by David Zwirner Books. His is a refreshingly new and deeply well-read voice, harmonizing with the pantheon of greats in the field of contemporary art criticism.

His interviews detail anecdotes from late 20th-century New York with gritty fascination, acknowledging how his generation comes after the fact of art writing as an established canon in Western literature, complete with journalism careers and Ivy League opportunities. That wasn’t always the case. As he chronicles along with veteran art writers, critics and historians, most of whom rose out of the culture wars in downtown Manhattan in the 1960s, the art of art writing has been initially an informal sideshow, cringingly subject to acid criticism by both vox populi and expert literati, as it is in some ways today.

What it Means to Write About Art contributes richly to the art of the interview, a craft that blends transcribed diction and oral literacy with an intuition for good conversation, like a street-wise neorealist filmmaker at large. The interview form lends itself to the informal characterization of lives reflected on paper and onscreen, as a band of light refracted off the surface of a painted canvas, a twisted sculpture, a conceptual installation.

The inner workings of thought are revealed in candid, personable fashion. *The Paris Review*, which published its half-century of archives online in the fall of 2010, had [long set this framework into play](#) [8] to exhibit contemporary voices as integral to critical literature. The series is also voraciously readable. In a similar fashion, at the end of 2014, *The New Yorker* [profiled curator Hans Ulrich Obrist](#) [9] between two nods by *ArtReview* as the most powerful figure in the art world. By then he had already recorded twenty four hundred hours of interviews, resulting in “[The Interview Project](#) [10]”. The title of his first book of essays explains his condition, “[dontstopdontstopdontstop](#) [11]” (2006), inspired by bouts of uninhibited listening that might be described as a kind of reverse logorrhea.

The writer [Lisa Cohen interviewed writer and critic Hilton Als](#) [12] for *The Paris Review* in the summer of 2018, around the time when *What it Means to Write About Art* was published. Cohen and Earnest both delved into the earliest memories and writing techniques that recur for Als as he reflects on his writing. “I see fiction not as the construction of an alternate world but as what your imagination gives you from the real world,” he told Cohen, after positively reviewing her book, *All We Know* (2012) for *The New Yorker*, where he is a staff writer. “Now, I am just treating everything as fiction, because I’m distrustful of the imagination, which is what memory is,” he explained to Earnest in *What it Means to Write About Art* (25).

[Kellie Jones: South of Pico](#) [13]

Video of Kellie Jones: South of Pico
קלי ג'ונס: דרומית לפיקו, מוזיאון המר



"I've never really thought of myself as a critic, actually," said [Kellie Jones](#) [14], recipient of the MacArthur Fellowship, also known as the "Genius Grant", in 2016, and also a fellow at the Institute for Research in African American Studies at Columbia University. "I don't know if I would call myself a critic because I don't feel that I'm 'critical' in that way. I do feel like I'm more of an advocate" (253). By writing art history, Kellie Jones upholds the work of her father Amiri Baraka, who led the Black Arts Movement. And similarly, the Native American writer [Paul Chaat Smith](#) [15] cultivates broader awareness for the contemporary presence of Indigenous Peoples. These are only two examples of writers who have taken up the subject of art as a potent means through which to introduce enduring social, gender, cultural, and economic diversity into the intellectual history of a modern nation, as they have in America, with repercussions around the world.

The conversation between critics, writers, historians, and theoreticians in the American art world began as an argument in the 1960s, when the pioneer New York art critic Clement Greenberg revised the language that was used when writing about art. In other words, he transformed not only what it meant to write about art, but how to do it. He initially countered the trendsetting critic Harold Rosenberg when he wrote "[How Art Writing Earns Its Bad Name](#) [16]" (1962) for the defunct magazine *The Second Coming*, published by Renaissance scholar David Rosand. His essay breaks down contentions over representation and its abstraction in art, and in writing.

[Clement Greenberg - Lecture](#) [17]

Video of Clement Greenberg - Lecture

הרצאה של קלמנט גרינברג, ה-17 בינואר, 1976, ב"ארטנט", AA בייס לארכיטקטורה

Furthermore, Greenberg pressed a momentous, Hemingway-like resolve for honest, clean prose in art writing, beyond what the seasoned critic and Museum of Fine Arts, Houston curator Barbara Rose called "total subjective junk" (380). Rose echoed the sting of Greenberg's criticisms. He denounced art writing as "pseudo-description, pseudo-narrative, pseudo-exposition, pseudo-psychology, and -- worst of all -- pseudo-poetry." And he concluded: "The pity, however, is not in the words; it is in the fact that art itself has been made to look silly."¹

Greenberg effectively defended art by critiquing art writing. At the same time, he emphasized how literary pursuits are intimately entwined with the making of art careers, which, to a great extent, are dependent on a healthy critical literature. Throughout the interviews in Earnest's book, the name Greenberg is often referenced and praised. For some, he is still intimidating.

In one telling anecdote during Earnest's interview with the inimitable [Lucy Lippard](#) [18], the Greenberg name had become a joke in the forum of the general assembly among New York intellectuals, in the heady days of sexual revolution and Civil Rights, as budding young feminists and African-American historians were raising the bar on social responsibility in the cultural sector. Lippard recounted for Earnest of when she asked Greenberg what he meant by "quality" during a lecture that he gave at MoMA. He gave a short reply, which was met with a surprising retort: "If I have to tell you that, I have to tell you the difference between red and green." To which Lippard wittily responded: "Rosenberg and Greenberg?" (293)

Despite what many interviews chronicle as Greenberg's downfall, when his predictions and authority as a journalistic art critic have been stymied by the changing scene and the fickle nature of popularity in the greater art scene, his writing style remains seminal, a foundation on which contemporary writing stands, especially when it is about art. Earnest transcribed many influential



voices who have directly benefited from the collegial engagement of Greenberg firsthand. He crafted essential required reading lists for the youngest generation of writers intent on gaining art literacy, or on finding a new voice in cultural journalism by writing for publications like *Art in America*, *ARTNews*, *Artforum*, and more recently *Hyperallergic* and *Brooklyn Rail*. The legacies of *Art in America* and *ARTNews* in particular stand as pillars that have contributed not only to the life of art, but, as publishers, also sustained the livelihoods of poets like the contemporary Eileen Myles, and the towering 20th-century icon, John Ashbery. Currently, the reputation of [Hyperallergic](#) [19] and [Brooklyn Rail](#) [20] is becoming increasingly influential on the American scene of art writing.²

The worlds of publishing and art, and the bridges connecting them, are built and maintained very differently than they had been in the late 20th century. There is a wealth of drama between the editorial management of *ARTNews* and *Artforum*, for example, and how its ideological battles were reflected in the changing tide of art movements. Similarly, the practices of arts coverage developed in sophistication as editors and writers changed sides.

The editorial rapids at the center of the art world were immediately felt and often redirected by writers who fought over aesthetic and social principles. Some went on to establish short-lived, although incredibly important independent publications, like the *Journal of Art* founded by Barbara Rose, and the pioneering *October*, initially launched by art writers inspired by the revolutionary filmmaking of Sergei Eisenstein, and who had fallen out with *Artforum* and its editorial aversion to theory.

October's co-founder Rosalind Krauss is a prestigious name in Earnest's pantheon of interviews. She wrote her defining essay, "[Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism](#) [21]" (1976), exploring the distinctions between medium and subject, and declaring video as singular among the visual arts. In her opening paragraphs, she asks if the medium of video is narcissism, or in broader terms, a "psychological state."

Earnest listened to Krauss explain the origin story of her essay, which coincided with the genesis of *October* magazine. It was part of a falling-out that she and fellow writers had with *Artforum*, whose editorial mandate delegitimized the sweeping characterization of new movements. Krauss was not trying to capitalize on the pluralities of modernism, but in her words, she wanted to find a "different path through modernism" (279).

[Rosalind Krauss. Knighthood: The Medium Strikes Back \[22\]](#)

Video of Rosalind Krauss. Knighthood: The Medium Strikes Back

אבירות: המדיום משיב מלחמה שיערה", ה-21 ביוני, 2017, קסטלו די ריבולי, מוזיאון ריבולי לאמנות עכשווית

Artforum and *October* are currently edited in part by Yve Alain Bois, who is responsible for one of the major connections between French culture and American art history. Earnest listened to him speak about his childhood in Algeria, where his aesthetic sense was fired by the non-figurative Belgian painter Gustave Singier. "It wasn't even a good work of art," he admitted. "That struck me to the point that I still remember everything about it" (49). Bois drew with a fascination for Mondrian. When he finally saw the Mondrian retrospective in Paris in 1968, it was postponed because of the May uprisings. Instead of returning to his drawing pad, he took up a pen to write.

"The French world today is still extremely clannish: if you're not with me, you're against me. This kind of openness, which is typical of American intelligentsia, is actually one of the main reasons I stayed in America," Bois told Earnest, chronicling a brief history of art collection in America and France, while emphasizing the role of art writing in merging and distinguishing taste between the



two countries. "I had fantasized about America as a place where, because of museums and all that, there would be a lot of knowledge about 20th century art. But I found there was no one teaching 20th century art" (60).

Bois reflected on his role influencing the early integration of contemporary art into the American institutions of education and writing. His collegial interactions with such figures as Rosalind Krauss continue, as she participated in the February, 2019, winter issue of *October*, with her essay "The Troubles of the Neck," about William Kentridge. And he has retained his "French universalism," rejecting identity politics. But even if it is a relatively small, insider's world, he confirms that art history has become sophisticated in the last two decades. It embraces pluralism in a way that it had not in the past.

Earnest had asked Bois the most basic questions about contemporary art, such as the general public would likely drool to ask people who make a living in the art world. Bois answered that the function of art is "To make us live a better life", and that so far as defining art goes, "Every work creates the condition of discourse that should respond to it" (65). And as for defining himself as an art critic, or art historian, he goes back and forth, dodging the ignorance of the former and the staleness of the latter.

For the latest, 113th issue of the Berlin-based art publication [Texte Zur Kunst](#) [23], co-founder Isabelle Graw explored reflexive questions with the art historian Sabeth Buchmann in the article, "[The Critique of Art Criticism](#) [24]", published in March, 2019. Graw and Buchmann formed elaborate theoretical patterns to resurrect the nearly 30 years of *Texte Zur Kunst* criticism since it began and had grown from the German milieu into a collaborative, global forum for artists and intellectuals, when it became bilingual in 2006.

"Our own perspective on art, which is informed by structuralism and psychoanalysis as well as social and cultural history, cautions against failing to recognize the share that subjective projection, imagination, and interpretation contribute to the 'aesthetic' animation of dead - or, for that matter, organic - matter: the reference to forms of existence and agency independent of any subject, we believe, is insufficient to explain why specific material objects are selected in the name of art," they wrote, reflecting on the contradiction between the exhibition of art objects and the expression of subjective definitions of art, which, ideally, should demand linguistic and material reinvention.

Graw and Buchmann defend the personalization of individual experience with art and its definitions and contexts. By critiquing criticism itself, they, in turn, reinforce the role of the critic, and that of the writer as a subjective, psychological agent, as an essential, interdependent extension of art. The subject, in other words, is responsible for art being art.

Identity implies diversity. A writer, like an artist, must emerge from the opposites of conformity and distinction into an anomaly of consciousness that evades immediate definition, but that is also unavoidably direct, bracing, participatory. The body, the mind, and the heart are simultaneously the mediums for self expression, as they are apertures of passive consumerism. Somewhere in the middle, objects and ideas are traded, turning the soil of creation.

In her summer of 2016 [essay for Artforum](#) [25], titled "The Identity Artist and the Identity Critic", writer and artist Hannah Black clarified: "Tokens are currency, and currency only exists insofar as it's exchanged." She was referring to the tokenism of identity and its loss when it is exploited by commerce and popularity.

"Art is a place to think, even if it's also a place where that thought gets repackaged and commodified," explained Black. "Equally, art is not a space of pure self-expression. It is a place where we can treat the self as historical and social material...Art can come close to the real structure of "identity," which also entails a kind of nonidentity with the self."

"Collectivity might be the necessary first step toward making life bearable, but the production of that collectivity may be less cozy than strategies of inclusion, diversity, and universality suggest," she concludes. In the hands of Earnest, a book-length collection of interviews has the potential to cross-examine the identity of the critic, beyond personality and the vicissitudes of art world politics,



towards a clear evaluation of the role itself.

The question of the art writer's identity will endure as long as there will be art. The difference between writer, critic, and historian frames the debate. It is an all-too-common anti-intellectual trope to conceive of the art writer as a twice-failed artist in the vein of Saltz, a wounded healer who never found success in art, and later lost decisive battles in literary publishing as an independent author, only to devolve into equal parts golem and homunculus of New Journalism and cultural criticism.

That art writing should always add negative critique, or that it should aim for pure, journalistic objectivity devoid of personal relationships, that advocacy is a crime, or that it is best written by overeducated experts, are common misperceptions. Writers in the highest editorial, academic, and critical positions dispel these myths, in Earnest's book, with direct clarity, and often with a refreshing sense of humor, as many tell stories of when they were young, when New York was different, and the art world was smaller, more approachable and comprehensible to regular people.

David Carrier was right, critiquing *What It Means To Write About Art* for [Hyperallergic](#) [26] last October, soon after the book hit the shelves, by saying that its title was too general. It focuses almost solely on New York heavyweights. But it is a generous, welcome work of biblical significance for emerging classes of young writers everywhere. And truly, a great many are now riding the subway from Brooklyn to Manhattan, scanning *The Paris Review* archives and the works of writers interviewed in *What It Mean To Write About Art*, desperate for new epiphanies to affirm that there is no one way to write, and that writing about art is viable writing, even literature.

- [1](#). Clement Greenberg, "How Art Writing Earns Its Bad Name," *Encounter*, Dec. 1962, p. 71
- [2](#). Hal Foster, a staple art critic of the 1970s, and now Professor of Art and Archeology at Princeton University, said to Earnest: "Of course there are all kinds of online reviews, but in many ways that pluralism has watered criticism down. I'm fine with "Hyperallergic", say, or "The Brooklyn Rail; they have a service to render. I just don't see them as critical projects." (155).

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[23] <https://www.textezurkunst.de/113/>

[24] <https://www.textezurkunst.de/113/critique-art-criticism/>

[25] <https://www.artforum.com/print/201606/the-identity-artist-and-the-identity-critic-60105>

[26] <https://hyperallergic.com/466591/what-it-means-to-write-about-art-interviews-with-art-critics-jarrett-earnest-david-zwirner-books-2018/>