

HOW  
TO  
WRITE  
ABOUT  
CONTEMPORARY  
ART

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**Thames & Hudson**

- Q1 What the art is, and who the artist is [1]?
- Q2 What it might mean [2]?
- Q3 Why we might care now [3]?

The plugged-in art-critic/journalist is perhaps the most valued conduit to art-industry news, ideally combining the accessibility of journalism with criticism's acute perceptions about art. Jargon-free, the op-ed news story is relayed in a conversational tone that inspires readers' confidence in their privileged informer.

Here is Ben Davis, reporting as the 2012 New York Frieze art fair opened in its swish new tent:

The giant Frieze Tent [1] looks smart; the sweeping venue is filled with natural light (even in the relative gloom of a gray afternoon) and pleasant to navigate, despite its immensity; and the roster of exhibitors feels well-chosen [2]. The crowd is lively and Manhattan's millionaires seem to be in a buying mood [3]. The space even feels relatively laid back for such a high-stakes affair. Heck, even the bathrooms look great.

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Source Text 41 BEN DAVIS, 'Frieze New York Ices the Competition with its First Edition on Randall's Island', *BlouinArtinfo*, 2012

This opener may sound breezy and off-the-cuff, but consider how much hard information Davis gets across effortlessly:

- [1] the Frieze art fair is *big*—maybe even growing—in its flash new venue;
- [2] the 'right' galleries are in attendance;
- [3] moneyed New Yorkers seem to be visiting in droves, and the place is buzzing with trade.

Moreover, as Davis reports, the architecture is a pleasure: bright even on an overcast day, and furnished with impressive bathrooms—the whole suggesting not only understated luxury but the organizer's attention to detail. Here is Davis again, as the fair came to its close:

Racing around Frieze's big tent, I had a sort of epiphany, the equivalent of the moment when you realize that the outline of the vase is actually two faces looking at each other. [1] I suddenly had the very strong sense that the art, the supposed point of all this, was the *excuse* for the event itself, rather than the other way around. Background and foreground switched places [...]

Embedded in the environment of the art fair or the art opening, the objects on view realize their status as 'conversation pieces' [2], as excuses for a very specific social interaction. In the future, we may remember this epoch of art as being, above all, about the production of some very clever theme parties.

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Source Text 42 BEN DAVIS, 'Speculations on the Production of Social Space in Contemporary Art, with Reference to Art Fairs', *BlouinArtinfo*, 2012

The writer updates the old-fashioned, novelty-art reversal [1] to a macro-scale, applying this figure/ground inversion to the current art-world: in the chat-a-thon that is the art fair, artworks end up as serviceable conversation-starters and party backdrops [2].

Davis is witty while offering intelligent reflection on the shape-shifting mechanisms of the art system. And **let's face it: weak art-writing is depressing not only for its dense language and unfathomable logic: it is also unrelentingly humorless.** If you can bring a smile to readers' lips and still get your facts straight, then—in op-ed journalism, not academic or institutional writing, which demands 'serious'—please do so. Remember

‘the baker’s family who have just won the big lottery prize’ (see page 46): a phrase that manages to turn Goya’s line-up of aristocrats into a curtain-call for a theatrical comedy about, well, an 18th-century baker winning the big-prize sweepstakes. Even 160 years later the phrase is still pretty funny, still packing its punch.

> Who’s doing the talking?

The eternal mark of a true art-critic is the insistent return, again and again, to the artwork, and art-making itself. The extract from the second of Davis’s texts reprinted above (Source Text 42) is just the opening ‘hook’ and final ‘sting’; in between he offers a mini round-up of other art events round town (Marina Abramovic at MoMA; Carsten Höller’s funfair slides at the New Museum), all reconnected to his chicken-and-egg question: which comes first, the art object, or the social interaction it generates? **Unfailingly, I believe, the true art-critic’s eye will drift toward the art.** In contrast, a journalist with only the faintest curiosity about art—basically a tourist on a brief stopover in the art-world—is perpetually distracted, turning his attention to anything *but* art. The giant price tag; the glamorous gallerist; the collector’s gorgeous beachfront home: **the non-art journalist will sooner devote a paragraph to relaying verbatim what an artist ordered for lunch** rather than mystify his reader with the art, a subject he has no idea how to talk about (see *The first time you write about art*, page 44).

As we’ve seen, the gist of Sally O’Reilly’s response to Sarah Thornton’s *Seven Days in the Art World* (see *How to write a book review*, page 179) is not that the book is badly observed or unappealingly written, but that the author seems to tunnel her vision only on the starriest edges of the art-universe, and fails to recognize innumerable other planets: countless regional scenes; bloggers and small publishers; academics outside Goldsmiths in London or CalArts in Los Angeles; small-scale project spaces and art-dealers; and the millions of non-celebrity artists dependent on their day-jobs to get by. At times these satellites collide, but much of the time they occupy separate galaxies. Good art-critics have a sense of most (if not all) these sub-sets. Many are (or go on to become) lifelong art devotees; instinctively, they write for the like-minded.

The non-specialist journalist probably has a relationship with art more like that of economist Don Thompson, who spent the equivalent of a gap year investigating the big-money, auction-going tip of the art-world to pen the popular *The \$12 Million Stuffed Shark*.<sup>105</sup> Compare the passage from Thompson’s book immediately below with an *Art in America* op-ed from art veteran Dave Hickey that follows.

What do you hope to acquire when you bid at a prestigious evening auction at Sotheby’s? A bundle of things: a painting of course, but also, you hope, a new dimension to how people see you [...]

The motivation that drives the consumer to bid at a branded auction house, or to purchase from a branded dealer, or to prefer art that has been certified by having a show at a branded museum, is the same as that which drives the purchase of other luxury consumer goods [1]. Women purchase a Louis Vuitton handbag for all the things it may say about them. The handbag is easily recognized by others, distinguished by its brown color, gold leather trim and snowflake design. [...] Men buy an Audemars Piguet watch with its four inset dials and lizard-skin band even though their friends may not recognize the brand name, and will not ask. But experience and intuition tells them it is an expensive brand, and they see the wearer as a person of wealth and independent taste. The same message is delivered by a Warhol silkscreen on the wall or a Brancusi sculpture in the entrance hall [2].

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Source Text 43 DON THOMPSON, *The \$12 Million Stuffed Shark*, 2008