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TOTAL ECLIPSE OF THE ART

By Ben Davis
January 2011

As 2010 came to a close, Stephen Squibb over at Artlog put together a helpful crib sheet of the best moments of art criticism of the year. I admire this list (and not just because I'm on there, though that's probably part of it). It's a more heroic gesture to try to pick out what's worth remembering than it is to issue crabby proclamations like "criticism is dead."

Still, the way I think about the present moment is this: Art criticism is in eclipse. This is a carefully chosen metaphor. Let me explain.

If you had to name the major development in art discourse during the 2000s, it would undoubtedly be the ascent of "art news," which has definitely replaced "art criticism" at the center of discussion. There's been an enormous proliferation of writing about the art scene. Artforum.com's "Scene and Herd" was founded in 2004. Artinfo.com, the publication I write for, was founded in 2005. And of course, there is the tremendous excitement generated by the art blogosphere, which draws its strength from attitude and outrage.

Heck, just yesterday Lindsay Pollock, a well-known art journalist, was named editor-in-chief of Art in America, long a redoubt of art criticism.

A simple logic governs this proliferation of "art news": Readers care a lot more about reporting on the art world than they do about reviews of art. By whatever metric you use — Web traffic, reader feedback, or just percentage of the collective brain taken up — people are more inflamed by the latest institutional scandal or art-related celebrity sighting than they are by quaint, old-fashioned discussions of what, exactly, makes an artwork good.

So it sometimes seems that the art scene has swallowed the art itself. The galleries are more packed than ever at the same time that writing about art seems strangely directionless. As in a solar eclipse, the halo around art grows ever brighter and more distinct, even as the light source itself vanishes from view.

One explanation for this development is technological. The 2000s saw the Internet come to predominate over print, and, in a certain sense, the medium is the message. Information circulates faster on the Internet. The natural consequence of this is a different tempo of art writing. Worthwhile criticism — the kind that's more than just "I liked it" or "this blows" — requires time to digest and space to breathe. The Web tilts art writing towards a different style and a different subject matter.

But though the medium may be the message, it doesn't always get the last word. As I've argued before, the rise of serious art criticism — in the sense of the "theory-crit" that one associates with the old, exciting Artforum — had a specific material context: the turbo-charged expansion of the post-WWII university system, which produced a robust audience for highly abstract art theory.

"Theory-crit," however, always had an internal flaw, summed up by Walter Robinson, my former editor at Artnet (another pioneer in online art news, incidentally) who likes to point out that if you read the average Artforum review you wouldn't know that the objects in question ever existed in a real space, let alone were merchandise for sale.

The expanding market for "art news" coincided with the ballooning of the more commercial side of

the art world in the '00s: the explosion of art fairs (Art Basel Miami Beach debuted in 2002, Frieze in 2003), the rise of the "ego-seum," the hunger of corporations to tap high-culture cachet (Takashi Murakami's team-up with Louis Vuitton was in 2003), the triumph of art-as-investment, and the "emerging artist" wave that saw galleries harvest kids fresh out of school (Alex McQuilken's "Fucked," a video of the 19-year-old artist having sex made while she was at NYU, famously sold out at the 2002 Armory Show). But everything about "theory-crit" requires the reader to buy the idea that the academy is the most important tastemaking center. Thus, the commercial explosion created a space where all the stuff about the market and the social scene, institutional moves and their political ramifications, actually feels more relevant than the most "serious" criticism.

And so, in a kind of dialectical response to theories of aesthetics that don't have that much to say about art's context, you get reporting on art's context that doesn't have that much to say about aesthetics.

Just because you can't see the sun in an eclipse, however, doesn't mean it's gone. The above reflections make me think that criticism's loss of luster has less to do with some terminal death spiral for serious thought than it does with some weaknesses internal to the old theories people used to make art seem important.

I believe there's a tremendous hunger for serious art criticism out there — it just has to be criticism that actually engages with the contemporary reality of art. After all, without an interesting perspective on what makes visual art distinctive, all you have left is the art world as a crappy arm of pop culture or a place for high-end gambling.

At the same time, the above thoughts also put a positive spin on the "art news" boom. Set against the de facto idealism of "theory-crit" (reducing art to pure theoretical machinations), the appeal of reporting on the art scene would seem to be partly that it yanks art back down to earth. "Art news" is a mug's materialism. Which would mean that all the pulsating, magnetic shimmer of "art news" is really just displaced glow from the object itself, that is, a real investment in art as something relevant. The sun will come out tomorrow.

Interventions is a new weekly column by ARTINFO deputy editor Ben Davis. He can be reached at bdavis@artinfo.com.