

How to Be an Art Critic

Edward Lucie-Smith

Edward Lucie-Smith has been called 'the world's most legendary and prolific art critic'. He has published over 100 books, many of which form the basis of university art history programmes around the world.

CJLPA invited him to boil down his knowledge and experience to a concise set of propositions.

Since I am now 87 years old, I have inevitably formed certain views about what I do, or try to do, both about writing in general, and more specifically about writing about the visual arts.

The first and most important of these is that the audience is king. If they don't understand what you're trying to say, you've lost the game. This applies even if they disagree with what you are trying to tell them. In art criticism, perhaps even more so than in most other forms of critical writing, there's a constant temptation to lapse into gobbledegook. Pundits all too often try to make themselves look important, superior to the audience they are addressing, by using grandiose formulations. I try to resist this temptation.

More insidious is the related temptation, which is to treat the collective consciousness of the audience as a blank sheet, upon which the critic is entitled to scribble what they like. Nothing could be less true. Every member of the audience whom the critic addresses is an individual consciousness, different, even if only in small ways, from every other member. To a large extent, this audience may share a common culture, which leads them to react in—almost—the same way to the images and ideas that the critic presents to them. However, there is always a residue, in each of them, of purely personal experience, which affects how they will react to what is being offered. This means that successful criticism, like all successful writing, is essentially a conversation. It's not going too far to say that you have to begin in the middle, not at what seems to you to be the beginning.

This attitude of mine is affected by the history of art commentary during my lifetime. Both the Late Modern and what we now call the Contemporary epochs have been much influenced by rival belief systems. First by Marxism then, as orthodox Marxism declined, by the rival credo of Structuralism.

A critic inspired by any faith of this kind naturally tends to put the belief system to which they adhere at the very centre of what they do. The system supplies a framework, upon which they can hang their observations about the art works and art enterprises they encounter. In addition to providing a useful framework, it also supplies a security blanket, reassuring them that what they say about the art they encounter must in essence be right. Any apparent errors

or discrepancies can be refined away by further reference to the belief system they have embraced.

A further gloss upon this, where recent Western art is concerned, has been supplied by post-World War II politics. From the end of the war to the collapse of the Soviet Union at the beginning of the 1990s, there was a cultural rivalry that expressed itself through the competition between Western capitalist individualism and Eastern Bloc collectivism—art as an expression of the idealised socialist state. What this left out was the fact that the United States in particular promoted certain forms of art as a direct political response to Socialist Realism. Abstract Expressionism was a celebration of the power of the individual psyche, free to express itself without any form of governmental control. Not for nothing were some of the leading exponents of the style first-generation Americans. Abstract Expressionism, though it met with some resistance from McCarthyites in Washington, was skilfully publicised in Europe, and also here in Britain, by patrons connected to the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Later, American art modulated itself, and Pop Art conquered most of the Western-affiliated art world, with a little help from a group of post-war British artists who had fallen in love with American popular culture, as compared to the dreariness of their own post-war circumstances. Pop was capitalist, but it was also visibly democratic.

Later still, American art began to choke on the purity of its own non-political idealism. Hence the Minimal Art (though he hated the term) of Donald Judd. It tried to remove itself entirely from the political arena. The effort did not succeed. To support art that seemed to wish to detach itself entirely from society became a political gesture in itself.

What changed the situation was the collapse of the Soviet Union. This seemed to remove the main antagonist of now triumphant capitalist art from the arena. However, what one seems to see now, nearly 30 years later, is a triumphant re-emergence of political and social art, as typified, for example, by the work of the anonymous British graffitist Banksy. This fetches huge sums when sold at auction, often for charitable causes. Or simply when detached by others from the walls where the still unknown artist has chosen to place it. At the same time there can be no doubt about its efficiency as propaganda.

Simultaneously, there was an even greater change—the contemporary art world became increasingly plural. This change had been preparing itself for a long time, but after the millennium it became fully visible. What I mean by ‘plural’ is that a number of separate art worlds emerged, quite separate from the world of Europe-plus-the-USA.

There was already a flourishing art world, with its own mechanisms, in Latin America. Now there were visibly separate art worlds in China, Russia, Japan, South Korea, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Iran, Turkey, the Gulf states, Australia, and New Zealand. I’ve been personally to all of these, with the exception of Pakistan and Bangladesh, often more than once. I was in Cuba in the late 1960s, in Mexico in the 1970s, and again later, and visited much of South America in the 1980s, with repeat visits to a number of countries. I’d guess that I may possibly be the most travelled British art critic. These non-European art worlds are often diversified within themselves. In Russia, it is no longer simply Moscow and St Petersburg that count, as was the case under the aegis of official communism. There are major art-producing centres in Siberia and in Kazan, to name but two. In China there is not only the Central Academy in Beijing but also the China Academy in Hongshan, plus art hubs in Shanghai and Hong Kong.

The dialogue between these various centres and what we call the West is often complex. They admire the West, but they also criticise it. One can, for example, find examples of Pop Art today in Russia, visibly influenced by what happened in America in the now long-ago 1960s. There is also art that refers to and memorialises World War II, which retains its hold on the Russian imagination far more powerfully than it does here in the West. Plus, art that romanticises the now ruined space stations, from which the Soviet Union sent cosmonauts into orbit. These are both peculiar to Russia.

In China, the two major academies, Beijing and Hongshan, dominate the art world. Ai Weiwei received almost all his early education in art in the USA, and is now again, after a fairly brief period in China during and after the Beijing Olympics in 2008, living in exile. He figures hardly at all in the ongoing history of contemporary art in China, though he is undoubtedly a major figure here in the West.

Meanwhile in the West itself there are manifestations that are changing the character of the art world. There is a great push for greater recognition of women artists, though those chosen for this are often either very senior or actually dead. There is an even stronger push for recognising artists from what are described as ‘ethnic minorities’—that is, minorities within society, and therefore till very recently disadvantaged within Western cultural organisations and opportunities. To be more specific still, this tends to mean artists who are wholly or partly of African origin. The recent Black Lives Matter movement has had a powerful impact not only in the United States, where it began, but also here in Britain. The impulse to apologise for the insult of slavery has done much to re-politicise art in the countries where the Black Lives Matter movement has manifested itself.

What it has not done yet is to create much interest in the art of contemporary sub-Saharan Africa. The Dark Continent remains largely dark where contemporary art is concerned, in contrast to the other regions I have mentioned above. The one exception is perhaps South Africa.