

A HISTORY OF ROCK CRITICISM

BY ROBERT CHRISTGAU

WHEN DO WE SAY television becomes a cultural reality? Around 1948, right? And when did *The New York Times* radio columnist Jack Gould begin his move to TV coverage? November 16, 1947, with a review of the Theatre Guild production of a play called *John Flaherty*. Nor was Gould alone. John Crosby of the *New York Herald Tribune* was only the most prominent of countless TV critics scattered at dailies nationwide by the early '50s.

When do we say rock and roll becomes a cultural reality? Around 1955, right? And the first rock critic at a daily paper? The locally beloved, nationally obscure Jane Scott, who was 45 on September 15, 1964, when she reviewed a Beatles concert, commencing a long, effusive career at the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*. Nationally, however, this meant nothing. I'm aware of two generalists—downtown columnist Al Aronowitz of the *New York Post* and, crucially, jazz critic Ralph J. Gleason of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, later gray eminence at *Rolling Stone*—who wrote about pop music occasionally. No doubt there were others, as well as classical dabblers (one was Robert Micklin, who ceded *Newsday's* rock beat to me in March 1972). But dedicated critics? In the dailies? In the '60s? Not bloody likely. Stringer-turned-major-domo Robert Hilburn wasn't hired to replace forgotten stringer Pete Johnson at the *Los Angeles Times* until 1970. The insufficiently legendary Lillian Roxon, a hip and sharp-tongued version of Scott till her death in 1973, was a pop specialist at Australia's *Sydney Morning Herald* for years before she joined New York's *Daily News* in 1971. *The New York Times* relegated its occasional daily rock coverage to the dreadful freelancer Mike Jahn until 1972, then shared it between

better writers Ian Dove and John Rockwell until Rockwell came on staff in 1974.

By then—beginning with Richard Goldstein of *The Village Voice*, whose Pop Eye column began in 1965—rock criticism was epidemic. It was a staple of the nascent alternative-weekly business, de rigueur in short-lived lifestyle

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monthlies like *Eye* and *Cheetah*, raison d'être in such fanzines-going-commercial as Paul Williams' seminal *Crawdaddy*, Robert Somma's cerebral *Fusion* and Dave Marsh's gonzo *Creem*. You could read it in *Life* (Albert Goldman), *The New Yorker* (Ellen Willis), *Saturday Review* (Ellen Sander), and *Esquire* (myself). And of course, rock criticism was the backbone of the most successful magazine startup of the late '60s, *Rolling Stone*.

So why were the dailies so slow to catch up? Beyond the home truth that, artwise, the dailies are always slow, there were three reasons. First, the special hold of classical music on the high-brow sensibility should never be underestimated. Since opera and symphony seem the embodiment of genteel culture, popular music of every kind, jazz included, has always gotten short shrift critically. Second, rock criticism's '60s strongholds were mostly underground or counterculture, a formation the

dailies in their lowest-common-denominator caution resisted more recalcitrantly than the upmarket slicks. But I believe the third reason was most important. Rock and roll was supposed to be for kids.

Well, right. In the '50s, rock and roll *was* for kids. But even then that meant older kids, which is to say teenagers—incipient adults. You'd think some journalistic visionary would have tried to instill the newspaper habit in this demographic. Any failure to do so certainly rests more with such factors as the demon television and the imminent demise of Western civilization than rock criticism or the lack thereof. Still, some alert, thoughtful, entertaining music reviewing might have made a difference. Yet neither arts editors, with their middlebrow prejudices, nor general editors, with their hardboiled ones, seem to have considered it.

Thus rock criticism underwent a journey rather different from that of film (which was helped along, as TV criticism was later, by the movies' links to theater and hence literature). Strictly speaking, film criticism had a prehistory in the trades, as did rock criticism, with rhythm-and-blues proponent Paul Ackerman of *Billboard* the key name. Movie fan magazines began with *Photoplay* in 1911; date their musical counterparts to the swing magazines of the '30s or 1943's *Hit Parader*. But by 1920, with the 1915 release of *Birth of a Nation* a benchmark, the dailies had a lock on the critical appraisal of cinema in America, where the traditional newspaper standards that defined it as movie reviewing predominated.

At the new music mags and alternative weeklies, no such standards were in place. It was, of course, the '60s. The New Journalism was in the air, along

with loose talk of freedom, revolution and astrology. None of us was getting paid much, and few had actual jobs or believed we needed them. There was a world of necessity out there, and before long it would step on our necks; in the meantime, however, rock criticism was a literary haven. Even at *Rolling Stone*, where former daily reporter John Burks was charged with imposing order, the first reviews editor was only hired in June 1969. Greil Marcus wouldn't abandon his doctoral studies for a full-time career as an intellectual gadfly until 1972, and his standards were plentiful and stringent. He wasn't above rewriting submissions with no consultation (and little complaint). But when he was brought onboard to oversee a section that had previously come together ad hoc, he set himself against *Stone's* already entrenched culture of reverence. Marcus wanted fans who expected records to change their lives and got mad when they didn't. He wanted, he says, "betrayal and outrage and enthusiasm."

Standards established, he left in early 1970, and before the end of the year the job had passed to columnist Jon Landau, the straightest of the old *Crawdaddy* crew. A sometime record producer, Landau by 1977 was managing Bruce Springsteen, an artist he had famously dubbed "rock and roll future" in Boston's *Real Paper* before their business relationship began. Relying heavily on writers from the Boston alt weeklies as well as the Bay Area, Landau professionalized *Stone's* section while promoting an auteur theory derived from Andrew Sarris. This turn from the prevailing Kaelism—an unsystematic responsiveness that valued lively writing above all else—had the commonsensical effect of insisting that the artist with his or her name on the cover was expressing a vision traceable from album to album. But it also reinforced the culture of reverence by paying obeisance to trusted mainstays, including many singer-songwriters whose less-than-meets-the-eye equivalents in film Sarris regularly roasted to a crisp. Much of Landau's cadre has faded away. Janet Maslin and Stephen Holden both ended up at *The New York Times*, where

Maslin never wrote about music and Holden is now a film and theater critic who occasionally deigns to praise adult pop and/or dismiss anything liked by kids.

Countering *Rolling Stone* at a lower level of profitability was *Creem*, which soon lured Lester Bangs from California to Detroit, where he set a wildly irreverent tone many others there emulated. *Creem* was born to be brash—even now Dave Marsh writes with a chip on his shoulder in the self-published, outspokenly left-wing *Rock & Rap Confidential*. But it got truly crazy once Bangs started spouting copy and charisma. Except for Richard Meltzer, who first appeared in *Crawdaddy* and was Bangs' only acknowledged rock-critical

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inspiration, no colleague at *Creem* (or anywhere else) approached Bangs' particular brilliance. Unfazed by fame, yet so drunk on his own élan vital that his attempts at cynicism were often endearing, he wrote from an emotional, explicitly subjective laff-a-minute vantage that still offends prigs who consider the first person a sin. His unending passion for music fed off his knowledge and into his insights. *Creem* continued to embody a culture of irreverence even after Marsh and Bangs had moved to New York, in 1973 and 1976 respectively. If *Rolling Stone* gave the world Springsteen, *Creem* provided early contributor Patti Smith.

This polarity was far from absolute,

however. Multiplatinum demigod and punk godmother both resisted singer-songwriter gentility and arena-rock pomp with rebel poses, terse song forms and hard beats, and got hosannas in both *Stone* and *Creem* as a result. Different as they were, both magazines valued idealistic cunning and formal courage in not just the music they praised but the writing they published—auteurist gravitas had no more place in the straight press than gonzo nose-thumbing.

My aim when I took over the *Village Voice* Riffs section in 1974 was a synthesis—Meltzer meets Maslin, Holden meets Bangs. I also wanted more politics, more women writers and, please God, a few blacks and some salsa coverage—as well as more ways of seeing black music, as the word "disco" became the latest way to imply that African-American pop wasn't "artistic" enough. And though I didn't succeed to the extent I'd hoped, the attempt proved prophetic in the weeklies and, by osmosis, the dailies as rock criticism grew up. The *Voice's* Pazz & Jop Critics' Poll, which became official with a mailing to 24 close colleagues in 1974—and which in its 2002 edition canvassed some 1,500 critics and tallied ballots from 695 of them—provided an excellent way to gauge this growth.

Hand wringing is always a temptation in retrospectives like this, and I'll indulge before I'm through. Rock criticism was certainly more fun in the old days, no matter how cool the tyros opining for chump change in netzines like *PopMatters* and *Pitchfork* think it is now. But let me accentuate the positive. How did we get from a Beatlemania that went without significant critical consideration in the daily press to an embattled megabusiness that attracts locally generated reviews and features from the *Portland Press Herald* to *The Fresno Bee*? And this in addition to scads of weekly leisure guides and a shelf full of specialized national magazines, including no fewer than three cash cows ruminating on hip-hop—a style many baby-boomers refuse to recognize as music at all—that are also, what a coincidence, the first ever to

attract respectable numbers of African Americans to popular music journalism?

The answer is basically simple. With *Rolling Stone* a beacon, editors and publishers slowly climbed aboard. Rock's commercial juggernaut became impossible to ignore, as did the actually existing musical interests of working journalists whose hair kept getting longer and whose mean birth date kept getting later. Not that every hire advanced the craft. At the smaller papers, the popular music beat was (and still is) often tossed to whatever ambitious copyperson or local loudmouth put a hand up. Nevertheless, canons of artistic quality, critical vocabulary, historical overview and cultural commitment quickly asserted themselves. The aesthetic was hell on pretension and in love with authenticity, excitement and the shock of the new. Although it valued formal imagination over technical skill, it expected tuneful songwriting and regularly got hot for strong tonsils or slippery fingers deployed in the service of form, authenticity or both. The prose that articulated these standards favored a slangy informality that didn't rule out academese unfit for use in a family newspaper. Blues-and-country-had-a-baby and *Sgt.-Pepper*-begat-the-concept-album proved handy origin myths. With the circa-1976 advent of punk, the Velvet Underground was anointed a seminal band even though it hadn't sold many records, which was a crucial paradigm shift. Most important, and most remarkable, was that rock criticism embraced a dream or metaphor of perpetual revolution. Just as Marcus had insisted, worthwhile new bands were supposed to change people's lives, preferably for the better. If they failed to do so, that meant they didn't, in the cant term, "matter."

These generalizations are so sketchy they approach caricature; variations are legion, exceptions innumerable. But they sum up the ideology that underlies some gnostic gospel or other at *Spin* and *Creative Loafing* alike, and even in the dailies, where tastes and stylebooks can get pretty hidebound, they pertain big-time. From what I see at Pazz & Jop time, rock critics have more rebel rheto-

ric in them than any other journalistic subclass. The punk upheavals, which kicked in shortly after rock criticism established itself and were supported far more enthusiastically by the press than by record companies or radio, spawned a profusion of more-uncommercial-than-thou fanzines and an explosion of college music writing in official campus newspapers and insurgent publications.

Meanwhile, back at the dailies, punk put a permanent crimp in any hopes that the geek in the corner with the earphone head would automatically cough up the celebrity inches editors covet. By

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the mid-'80s, a burgeoning indie-rock subculture had turned so-called "critics' records" into a staple of discretionary coverage, a deal sealed when Nirvana briefly made alternative a byword. Of course rock critics had to provide backstage interviews and arena-pop reviews, although at the larger papers these tasks were often handed off to second-stringers, gossip columnists and entertainment reporters. But where a movie reviewer was obliged to acknowledge the weekly blockbuster, the plethora of musical options made it harder for editors to dictate specifics. Big prestige records—Sting solo albums, say—were widely reviewed. But surefire bestsellers in low-prestige genres like disco, metal and teenpop were counted less newsworthy than the latest by R.E.M. (launched as a critics' band) or the Replacements (never anything else). Disagreements between the cops on the beat and their sergeants at the desk occasioned considerable friction, and the superior officers often prevailed. But it's remarkable that there was an argu-

ment at all, and this stemmed in considerable measure from the history of rock criticism outlined above.

Personally, I think authenticity is a crock, and believe today's rock-critical orthodoxy is far too dismissive of pop forms and audiences, even at the dailies—the terse song forms and hard beats early rock criticism championed were explicitly pop usages. But there is an editorial logic to reviewing R.E.M. rather than Rick Springfield, Lucinda Williams rather than Mandy Moore—not just journalism's principled commitment to aesthetic quality, which we of course assume, but the self-evident fact that music criticism's reading audience is a subset of music's listening audience. Music is sensual, preverbal, counteranalytic and sometimes pretty dumb (which does not equate with bad). Except for sometimes pretty dumb (which does equate to bad), criticism is none of these things, even in its blatant consumer-service form.

Yet with music coverage ensconced, editors now dream of attracting the kids their predecessors disdained rather than the alienated college students they ended up hiring, who while less numerous are an apter target. The hardboiled middlebrows at the desk still glance at *Billboard's* Hot 200, woeful shadow of its 1999 self though it may be, and wonder why their paper hasn't weighed in on the new one by this Chingy guy (it is a guy, right?). Nor is there reason to believe these touching dreams will disappear. Editors will always think they understand "the reader" better than their minions. Nevertheless, giving rock critics their head contentwise is in the best interest of everyone concerned—readers and listeners, writers and musicians, captains of the music and journalism industries.

Rock criticism's literary dimension has been squeezed hard by a design-driven journalistic marketplace where print is seen as "gray." In *Rolling Stone*, *Spin*, *Vibe* and every other national music mag, review lengths have diminished inexorably, and the feature essay has gone the way of the California condor. Even in the alternative press, the drive to transform "arts coverage" into

“entertainment guide” is visible everywhere. Only on the Net, where the few critics with paying gigs suffer similar strictures but hobbyists enjoy more latitude, are the gonzo first-person and the mad harangue tolerated.

The musical marketplace, however, exerts rather different pressures. No longer does rock or any other kind of pop seem a commercial juggernaut. Yet whether the villain be “electronic theft” or the shortsighted abandonment of artist development in pursuit of the malleable audience and the high-overhead blockbuster, the end result is the same. And it’s not what self-serving doomsayers seeking punitive copyright laws claim, either. Music isn’t “dying”—although maybe some fun pop kinds will lose their juice once rich-and-famous is bled to a husk by reality television. It’s just spreading out.

Before the downloading panic, the key statistic about popular music was the approximately tenfold increase in album-length releases between 1988 and 1998. The figure has dipped some, but even if the current estimate of 27,000 new titles annually is correct, almost every artist ever cut loose by a major label—as well as innumerable up-and-comers and going-nowheres—will

continue to hawk more hours of recorded music than there are hours in a year for years to come. Assuming the Recording Industry Association of America doesn’t destroy online music altogether, the Internet will make it easier to access, and for better or worse will help shift consumer focus from albums to individual songs. But there’ll still be more music than anyone can absorb, especially anyone with other things to do.

This means that whether the technological future is utopian or draconian, the consumer-service aspect of rock criticism has been redefined. Consumers need gatekeepers far more now than when popular music was what got played on the radio and made the charts. They need people whose life-work is seeking out good music of every sort and telling the world about it—maybe not literally, but with the linguistic informality (and rebel rhetoric) the mood and ambition of quality popular music still regularly demand.

Thus we have the influential *Blender* model—several hundred brief, graded record reviews arranged alphabetically, a format that traces back through *Entertainment Weekly* to the *Consumer Guide*. Here, regrettably if predictably, uniform length and the refusal to pre-

sume reader sophistication flattens too much of the prose. Things are looser in the hip-hop press, but propagandistic myopia, compounded by permissive editing, renders even *XXL* and *Vibe* duller than they might be. The alt weeklies continue their wildly inconsistent work, constrained more than ever by escalating newsprint costs and insulting word rates. And finding the provocative criticism you’d hope would be flowering on the Net—I could name a few random obsessives, and there have to be more—is harder than unearthing the one riveting indie-rock album in a pile of patched-together freebies. Informed gatekeepers do perform a social function, and they’re rarer on the Net than in college radio.

In theory, and conceivably in practice, the dailies could help fill this need. The newspaper business missed its chance to define rock criticism at the outset. Even if it had been on point, however, the rush of reality would certainly have outstripped the definitions. Now that same business shares with *Rolling Stone* the opportunity to hang on for dear life as it follows a story that’s never disappeared from human life whether it got into the papers or not—and, bet on it, isn’t about to now.

SUBJECT/OBJECT

FIRSTHAND KNOWLEDGE IN CRITICISM

BY SASHA FRERE-JONES

FICTION CRITICS ARE usually novelists. Poetry reviewers are, with very few exceptions, poets. Nearly half of all art critics are also artists. But when you look to the two commercial art forms that earn more than these three art forms summed and cubed, something funny happens. Film critics are rarely directors or actors, and pop music critics are rarely musicians. And though some of my fellow musicians disagree, this seems appropriate. Film and pop are art forms that work quickly, and through wide dispersal. Their impact leapfrogs training or literacy. To understand these forms is not necessarily to know their blueprints but to be able to absorb and understand their impact. Because I am both a musician and a pop critic, I can count measures and subdivisions more easily than someone without any musical training. But my ability to identify time signatures doesn't necessarily put me ahead of any other critic with good ears and a lot of energy. Pop music and film replicate because of their immediacy. Image and sound both have global transparency. You don't need to know where Britney Spears learned her trade to participate fully in her work, to access the zing of a song like *Toxic*. And though an analysis of the song's chromatic loop-de-loops might be pointed and interesting, it will likely speak to a narrative of production that runs alongside the text but doesn't necessarily relate to how the text lives and bounces around in the world.

Pop is an art form built by and for amateurs, who are sometimes remunerated on a scale beyond the ken of professionals in any field. Faced with this extreme social algorithm, professional musicians often resent their time in expensive music schools and on

the club circuit. So without perceiving it themselves, musician critics can become champions of the obscure or the technically proficient simply to realign the relation of their art to the world and to alleviate their personal disappointment. Who can blame them? Move the goalposts and the score changes. The problem here for a

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musician who wants to be a critic is that much musically innovative and socially rich pop music—especially now—is a direct repudiation of the idea of an apprenticed, learned craft. Just as it would be a mistake to let, say, conservative economist Francis Fukuyama review a book by Marxists Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri—not that such a blatant editorial mistake would happen at a major newspaper in 2004—professional musicians are *precisely* the last people who should review popular music. Pop is the eruption of an unknown voice using overlooked technology. Knowing how it usually goes is exactly what you don't want.

Musician critics may let their professional bias discolor critique sometimes, but they also have a body of material knowledge that can enhance the discourse around pop music. Musician critics David Grubbs and Franklin Bruno remind us that there are fruitful ways for a musician to use specialized knowledge as a booster for analysis. “Probably, given how popular

music works,” says Bruno, “it's less important that critics know much about, say, harmony, than about recording technology.” As Grubbs adds, “I have a decided preference for critics who understand the nuts and bolts of their given subject—not because years spent in the salt mine confer authority, but rather because these things aid a writer's powers of description. Think of *American Pastoral* and Philip Roth learning how leather gloves are crafted.”

With professional frustrations set aside, musician critics are well-suited to enrich critical analysis with insights into modes of production and the material basis of an aesthetic, the latter an area of huge potential for pop criticism: What equipment has enabled what genres? What songs are being quoted in which other songs, and how often? How common are certain rhythmic patterns, and where did they first appear? Too often, though, the musician critic reaches for a form of self-pity common to many craftspeople rubbing against the digital age. “You try it” was the refrain I heard from many musician critics, indicating distaste for both critics who don't play an instrument—critics could easily respond, “You try going to 200 shows a year”—and players succeeding in a musical field the musician perceives as inimical to their training. The trained jazz improvisers resent the hip-hop artists who don't play an instrument but sell records, the hip-hop artists resent the rock bands who receive more press coverage, the indie artists resent the critics for pointing out where the indie artist went to college. Musicians, not surprisingly, take music fairly personally.

But so does everybody. That's what makes it popular music. Like others,

musicians and critics frame their experience in the first person. This is sympathetically enhanced by the high degree of first-person subjectivity in pop. Multiply all of this and you see a high dose of informal subjectivity in pop criticism. (This variable is less prevalent in art criticism, where a statement such as “The big titanium bunny made me think of when I learned to ride a bike” would not likely appear.) All this first-person yammering is a good thing for pop criticism, which has room for both high theorists and bedroom diarists. The problem with a musician critic’s first-person complaining is not that it’s complaining—it’s the claim to authority that, in turn, blocks perception. If a musician believes, *prima facie*, that *he knows better*, his critique is no more than an expression of pique and an explicit rejection of the democratizing power of the music at hand. But if the critic and listener can agree to occupying the same unstable and overheated ground, then anything is fair game—Althusser’s theory of ideological state apparatuses, the difference between Chet Atkins’ and Steve Vai’s use of the whammy bar, and how it feels to buy your first stereo with your own money.

This is all framed by the fact that pop criticism is anchored by (or defined against) the reality that pop music is mechanically reproduced and sold. The reader of pop criticism is a consumer in a way that someone considering going to a gallery show is not. A minority may read pop criticism as prose or philosophy, but to the larger audience it is a betting broadsheet. Will I win, lose or

show with my 10 bucks? When answering that question, what constitutes expertise for the relevant critic? Knowing how to play the guitar or, perhaps, knowing how to listen to records in the same way as other listeners? “I could never have written about Lucinda Williams’s *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road*, for instance, because the sound is so compressed I cannot stand to listen to it,” admits bassist-writer Tim Midgett. “If I hadn’t had a hand in mastering a bunch of records in my life, I

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might not have that problem, but I have it, and I have to be aware that my ears are the way they are.” The average reader likely agrees with *The Village Voice* critic and Burnt Sugar bandleader Greg Tate, someone whose musical expertise has not hampered his critical faculties: “I prefer critics with informed and passionate ideas about the art they review, who can write engaging prose, and could care less about their musical proficiency. Those who only deal with the product have proven as insightful as those with technical insight.”

With some exceptions, informed polymaths have more to offer readers

than the deep specialists. In the late 1960s, then-editor Greil Marcus published rock critic Lester Bangs in the relatively new *Rolling Stone*, even though he had published very few pieces. Bangs—who himself wrote and recorded music and even thought of ditching writing and becoming a full-time musician—then used the high copy needs of various review sections to stay busy and develop his craft. And while record reviewing is not the same beast it was when Bangs started in 1969, writers can still get a byline with almost no résumé. It is this unsupervised nature of pop criticism that has allowed remarkable stylists and thinkers to work with more formal daring and political chutzpah than their brothers and sisters across the aisles in the book review section.

Most of the important figures in pop criticism—Robert Christgau, Greil Marcus, Ann Powers—are not musicians but rather experts in hearing and understanding lateral connections. Pop tends to saturate and bear the mark of the present more than it boomerangs back and forth through time. A musician craftsman is often the opposite kind of agent, invested in the longitudinal history of a small niche. Whether an autodidact or a conservatory graduate, a musician comfortable with the pop audience and willing to subordinate technical knowledge to the needs of that audience would be a valuable critic indeed. Let’s hope we see more of this kind of critic, and soon. Blackberry rock is scheduled to peak in about five minutes.

CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITICISM AT THE CROSSROADS

BY JOSEPH HOROWITZ

WILLIAM JAMES HENDERSON'S review of the premiere of Dvorak's Symphony "From the New World" in *The New York Times* of Dec. 17, 1893, is one of the most impressive feats in the history of American musical journalism. Henderson begins:

The attempt to describe a new musical composition may not be quite so futile as an effort to photograph the perfume of a flower, yet it is an experiment of similar nature. Only an imperfect and perhaps misleading idea of the character of so complex a work of art as a symphony can be conveyed through the medium of cold type; yet when there is no other way, even that must be tried.

There follows a detailed account—of origins and intentions, methodology and programmatic allusions—that to this day may be the most evocative description of Dvorak's symphony ever penned. No one has more eloquently put into words the polyvalence of the famous Largo, in which the influences of plantation song and *Hiawatha* intermingle. "It is," writes Henderson, "an idealized slave song made to fit the impressive quiet of night on the prairie." He continues:

When the star of empire took its way over those mighty Western plains, blood and sweat and agony and bleaching human bones marked its course. Something of this awful buried sorrow of the prairie must have forced itself upon Dr. Dvorak's mind when he saw the plains after reading "The Famine" [Henderson here assumes

familiarity with Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha*, which all literate Americans once knew]. It is a picture of the peace and beauty of today colored by a memory of sorrows gone that the composer has given us at the beginning and end of his second movement.

It should not surprise us that this great era in American music criticism—the 1890s—was equally a great era in American classical music. Critics were focused on the creative act—and so were conductors, orchestras and audiences.

But Henderson's review is most remarkable where it deals with the question most debated about this work a century ago: "Is it American?" Boston's critics would answer: No. To Philip Hale, of *The Boston Home Journal*, Dvorak was a naive interloper, a "negrophile" susceptible to the notion that "the future of American music rests on the use of Congo, North American Indian Creole, Greaser and Cowboy ditties, whinings, yawps, and whoopings." New York critics disagreed, none more inspirationally than Henderson:

In spite of all assertion to the contrary, the plantation songs of the American negro possess a striking individuality. No matter whence their germs came, they have in their growth been subjected to local influences which have made of them a new species. That species is the direct result of causes climatic and political, but never anything else than American. Our South is ours. Its twin does not exist. Our system of slavery, with all its domestic and racial conditions, was ours, and its twin never existed. Out of the heart of this slavery, envired by this sweet and languorous South, from the canebrake and the cotton field, arose the spontaneous musical utterance of a people. That folk music struck an answering note in the American heart. . . . If those songs are not national, then there is no such thing as national music. It is a fallacy to suppose that a national song must be one which gives direct and intentional expression to a patriotic sentiment. A national song is one that is of the people, for the people, by the people. The negroes gave us this music and we accepted it, not with proclamations from the housetops, but with our voices and our hearts in the household. Dr. Dvorak has penetrated the spirit of this music, and with themes suitable for symphonic treatment, he has written a beautiful symphony, which throbs with American feeling, which voices the melancholy of our Western wastes, and predicts their final subjection to the tremendous activity of the most energetic of all peoples.

Henderson's review is today inconceivable in our daily press for three powerful reasons. The first is simply its length—3,000 words. Our reading and editorial habits preclude such leisurely exegesis. (Were Henderson's review to be quoted in the *Times* today, not a single paragraph would survive untrimmed.)

Second, Henderson was intimately familiar with the symphony and its composer before he sat down to listen to or write about it. A century ago New York's leading musicians and critics were members of the same community of culture. Contemporary accounts tell us that no sooner had the symphony ended than Dvorak's box was mobbed by music critics falling over one another in their eagerness to be the first to congratulate him. Henderson received the city's most notable conductors, singers and composers weekly at his home. His great friend Henry Krehbiel of *The New York Daily Tribune*—the acknowledged "dean" of New York's music-critical fraternity—was then the leading scholarly authority on plantation song; he was a de facto artistic adviser to Dvorak in America, feeding him samples of "Negro melodies" and Native American chants. On Dec. 15—the day before the premiere, two days before Henderson's review appeared—Krehbiel published a 2,500-word analysis of the *New World* Symphony, based in part on discussions with the composer and incorporating no fewer than 14 musical examples. Henderson also had the benefit of attending a "public rehearsal" of the *New World* Symphony, also on Dec. 15. When it came time to file his review, he was ready.

But the third reason Henderson's feat is unthinkable today is the one that most interests me. Today's music reviews are mainly about the act of performance. Henderson's review of the first performance of the *New World* Symphony is silent on this topic. The name of the conductor, Anton Seidl, is not mentioned once. Nor is the reader ever told what other music was played on the same program. In the proper order of things it simply did not matter.

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great era in American music criticism—the 1890s—was equally a great era in American classical music. Critics were focused on the creative act—and so were conductors, orchestras and audiences. By far the most performed composer in New York was Richard Wagner, who had died just a decade before. A living composer, Dvorak was widely acknowledged as the city's pre-eminent musician (imagine such a thing today). Of paramount importance to Dvorak—as to Seidl or Henderson or

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Krehbiel—was the creation of an American canon. That is: It was generally assumed that, as in Germany, France, Italy or Russia, the musical high culture of America would be grounded by a native repertoire of sonatas, symphonies and operas.

In Boston the Symphony regularly performed the music of Boston composers. No one pretended that they ranked with Mozart and Beethoven; no one cared. George Chadwick alone was performed 78 times prior to Serge Koussevitzky's arrival in 1924. In New York Seidl hailed Edward MacDowell as a greater composer than Brahms. That he was wrong is beside the point.

But no great American symphony was written, and no American canon materialized. Instead, American classical music degenerated after World War I into a culture of performance. Not American composers, but American orchestras, and foreign-born performers resident in America, comprised its

spine. The symbol of classical music for millions of Americans was an Italian conductor, Arturo Toscanini. Never before had a noncomposer enjoyed such living supremacy in the world of classical music, usurping the place of a Mozart or Beethoven, Wagner or Richard Strauss. Never before had a conductor of such stature and influence been so fundamentally divorced from the music of his own time and place. As if by default, classical music ceded leadership in American musical life to genres more vernacular. Popular music proved the more significant, more distinctive American contribution.

Certainly the American composer ceded leadership. However much Aaron Copland, through his writings as much as through his music, tried to redirect attention, Americans remained fastened on the dead European masters. So, over time, did conductors cede leadership. In New York before World War I, a Seidl or Theodore Thomas or Gustav Mahler championed the living composer with missionary fervor. So, in Boston, Philadelphia and Minneapolis, did Koussevitzky, Leopold Stokowski and Dimitri Mitropoulos. After 1950, however, only rarely were conductors true tastemakers. Rather, American orchestras became marketing and fund-raising machines terrified of alienating their subscribers. Gone, too, were the great classical music entrepreneurs of yesteryear: visionaries like Henry Higginson, who invented, owned and operated the Boston Symphony; or Oscar Hammerstein, whose short-lived Manhattan Opera bravely defied the elitism of the Met.

Instead, the nation's leading music businessman was Arthur Judson, creator of Columbia Artists Management, who insisted that only the public could lead taste. When the New York Philharmonic's gutless programming was challenged in 1931, Judson—who was also the Philharmonic's manager—could write, "I believe within the next few years the Beethoven Fifth, no matter how badly played, will be welcomed because of the message it conveys." Judson also advised, "There are certain composers like Bruckner and Mahler

who have not yet been accepted heartily by the American public. . . . We can only go as far as the public will go with us.”

Today the leadership vacuum remains. And yet, with the waning of modernism, important American composers (and other American composers alas less important) are reconnecting with orchestras and audiences. The erosion of high culture, the interpenetration of what had been elite and popular arts, may yet put classical music out of its misery. In my forthcoming history of *Classical Music in America*, I write:

What does “classical music” mean today? If the term is to retain anything like its old aplomb, it must refer to a moment now past and to its attendant prestige and influence. What comes next in these post-classical times? We will find out. Certainly we will not abandon Bach and Beethoven. Bruckner’s symphonies will continue to furnish cathedral experiences in the concert hall. But this tradition, on its own, can only diminish. Renewal, if renewal there will be, will likely come from the outside—from a postmodernism freed from the pantheon and its backward pull. The possible convergence of old ways and new will greatly depend on composers and other persons determined to lead taste.

What the composers may contribute remains an open question. . . . Equally unknowable, equally crucial is the coming contribution of the tastemakers—the people who run orchestras and opera companies, write about them, broadcast and record them. Traditionally, America’s high-cultural currents have benefited from the shaping initiatives of individuals of vision—or submitted to the vicissitudes of the market. . . .

[Steve] Reich, [John] Adams, [Gidon] Kremer are not “classical musicians.” Rather, they are eccentrics for whom neither Europe nor the concert hall represents the measure of all things musical. Unquestionably they point toward

a post-classical music of the future. But there is no predicting the topography of this new terrain, or its crucial impact upon the residual classical music landscape it will diminish or synergistically refresh.

To chart the history of classical music criticism in the United States is to discover a similar trajectory yielding a comparable crossroads. Krehbiel, to my mind, marks the apex—for his intellectual distinction, for his cultural breadth, for his activist role in advising and supporting Dvorak, in helping to engineer an “all-American” concert movement, in studying and promoting the folk and indigenous music of many

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nations, in annotating the programs of the New York Philharmonic, in translating German and French librettos as part of the fruitless but enlightened campaign for opera in English, in tirelessly lecturing and teaching professionals and laymen. More than a writer he was an organizer, a doer. The culture of performance sidelined critics as it did composers. In New York they were reduced to chronicling Toscanini’s concerts as rites of triumph. As chief music critic of the *Times*, Olin Downes felt called upon to testify:

The first Toscanini concert of the season by the Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra took place yesterday evening in Carnegie Hall. This meant an auditorium again crowded to capacity with the most impressive audience of the season—an occasion when music lovers in all walks of life assembled to hear Mr. Toscanini’s interpreta-

tions and do homage with him to the genius of Beethoven.

To his chagrin Henderson lived long enough to witness this genre of criticism and to groan in 1934, “Critical comment . . . is almost entirely directed to the ‘readings’ of mighty magicians of the conductor’s wand. . . . Can [the public] ever again be trained to love music for its own sake and not because of the marvels wrought upon it by supermen?” Downes was a new critical breed—a populist who advised the layman, in a 1941 essay, to “Be Your Own Music Critic.” This trust-the-public attitude ran parallel to Judson’s wait-and-see admonitions on repertoire.

During my own short tenure as a *Times* music critic, I discovered that I did not believe in the vast majority of the musical events I was sent to cover—and I feel quite certain that a Henderson or Krehbiel would have found New York’s concert fare of the late 1970s mystifyingly superfluous. I did not think that I was a particularly good *Times* music critic, nor did I think that a *Times* music critic was a particularly good thing to be. I could not accept the paper’s capitulation to a degenerate status quo. I could not abide its insistence that critics not write in the first person, and the linked prohibition on consorting with those they wrote about. The latter restriction—more an attitude than a coherent policy—was vaguely understood to be as venerable as the *Times* itself. And yet Henderson did not keep his distance from musicians and musical institutions—and neither, for that matter, did Olin Downes. As far as I am aware, the arm’s-length rule originated with Harold Schonberg, who became chief music critic in 1960. And neither Harold nor anyone else on the music staff seemed to share my discomfort with third-person pontification.

In retrospect the third person was already a terminally embattled posture of “objectivity” during the years—1976 to 1980—I was forced to employ it. The third-person omniscience of a Henderson or Krehbiel was girded by their confident grasp of music’s trajectory and its necessary future. By the

late 20th century there no longer existed a cultural consensus to do the girding; the mainstream, or what was left of it, was crippled and diffuse. Today, in an even more variegated and confused cultural environment, first-person opinion is inescapable even at the *Times*. Logically this concession dictates a more engaged critical presence. Granted, befriending the artist or impresario risks imbalanced judgments. But what personal judgments are not imbalanced?

There is a classical music crisis. It is artistic and economic, sociological and institutional. It cannot adequately be surveyed or understood on the sidelines. Those who write about classical

music need to know how and by whom orchestras and opera companies are run. They need to discern whether programming is captive to marketing and development or—as at Harvey Lichtenstein’s Brooklyn Academy of Music, where I toiled in the 1990s—whether it constitutes a creative initiative, galvanizing marketing and development in its wake. They need—like Alex Ross in *The New Yorker*—to command the full cultural landscape, to know where the high-low synergy is cooking. This degree of knowledge is possible only via immersion and advocacy—the charged posture of W. J. Henderson reviewing the *New World Symphony* 110 years ago.

Our fractured times require leadership from institutions, from composers, from conductors, from critics—once, long ago, a more bonded community. For all of us in music the moment is undeniably difficult—but also opportune.

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REFLECTIONS OF AN OUTSIDER CRITIC

BY M.J. ANDERSEN

IN THE FALL of 2002, Robert Melee's mother was for sale. The cost was \$6,000 an hour, during which time you could do with her as you chose. Evidently no takers emerged. And it is no surprise, considering the frightful figure Mom cut at the opening of Melee's show "You Me and Her" at the Andrew Kreps Gallery in New York's Chelsea neighborhood. For there she sat, in an elevated glass box, clad in nothing more than a boa and fishnet hose.

A grappling with Mommy across many media, Melee's exhibition included paintings, mobiles and video pieces. The ensemble functioned as a kind of creepy burlesque show on parent-child relations, with an indictment of suburbia thrown in for good measure. High as the yuck factor was, inscrutability ran a solid second: I visited the show one afternoon when Melee's mother was absent, and wandered through with no sense of who the specified "Her" might be. (A transsexual in a fright wig? Or was that her actual hair?)

I am not, by profession, an art critic. But as an editorial writer for a mid-sized daily, I am convinced that visual environments have more to do with our cultural identity, and hence our politics, than most public-policy devotees might allow. And so I look—at museum shows, at work in galleries, at billboards, movie posters and window displays, even at color schemes in hotel lobbies (where mauve, I am glad to report, has at last died a much-deserved death).

If we can speak of "outsider" artists, why not outsider critics? I consider myself one of the latter, and will admit to all the implied deficiencies. The beauty of this designation is that it covers most people who make up the potential audience for art: We are inter-

ested, somewhat informed, and would like to know more. Often, we also have no clue about how to evaluate much of what we see. Outsiders sense that more might be said about the work of Robert Melee than "Yuck." (Eeeee-uw! for instance.) And so, for help, we turn to the critic. Usually we do not turn to the insiders who write for such specialty

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journals as *Artforum*, *Art in America* or *ARTnews*—lovely as those folks may be—but to critics writing for mainstream publications: the newspapers and general-interest magazines that orient us quickly on a range of subjects.

Pity the poor mainstream art critic. He or she tills marginal soil, despite an explosion in art production in recent years. The National Arts Journalism Program's 1999 study, *Reporting the Arts*, found that mainstream publications allot to the visual arts the least space of nearly any art form. (Film is the big leader.) Not surprisingly then, for the critic, economic insecurity is part of the game. NAJP's *The Visual Art Critic* (2002) found that most practitioners at the more than 250 publications studied are freelancers. Of those who have full-time positions, many are obliged to cover other subjects.

Overwhelmingly, critics reported feeling a burden to explain why visual art mattered. In other words, not only do art critics feel perpetually called on to justify the work they review; in the

same breath, they work to justify their jobs. Small wonder, then, that most placed a premium on the freedom to simply describe work and attempt to place it in context. Fully two-thirds of those polled claimed a kind of booster role for themselves. The real stunner was that only 27 percent felt it important to determine the quality of the art they described. Job insecurity may account for some of the reluctance to judge. But not all. It is therefore worth asking whether the working conditions that confront most critics today have produced a kind of critical vacuum (the occasional diatribe notwithstanding), and whether that in turn has led to a decline in what art aspires to, even as the quantity of art itself soars.

A CRITIC WHO is inclined to sort through and judge, to evaluate technique, ponder an artist's intent, discern attempts to grapple with or reject forebears, has her work cut out for her. No coherent movements in the making of art currently exist. At the same time, art history is long and growing longer. A tradition once confined largely to drawing, painting and sculpture fractured decades ago, spawning a variety of new forms: conceptual and performance pieces, earth works, video art. The 2002 Whitney Biennial suggested that the parameters for what may be considered art are broader than even the most up-to-date critic might allow. The biennial featured, among other things, a project by the Auburn University School of Architecture to make houses for the rural poor out of recycled materials. The show's curator, Lawrence Rinder, asserts that the bounds of artistic practice and experience are even more capacious than the biennial survey proposed.

This explosion of forms has

occurred alongside a proliferation of styles within media. As the critic Raphael Rubinstein argued in a March 1, 2003, essay for *Art in America*, recent years have brought forth so many styles in painting alone that it has become impossible to keep track of them all. An inability to survey the entire landscape in one medium (and these days, that landscape is international) makes it difficult for a critic to speak with authority. On what basis, then, should he or she presume to judge new work?

Some of the best conversations I have had on this subject have been with curators, who, perhaps surprisingly, express sympathy for the position of contemporary art critics. The lack of clear trends is confusing and difficult for the critic, acknowledges Judith Tannenbaum, curator of contemporary art at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum. But it is healthy for art. "It gives people room to go in their own direction," she notes. By contrast, during the post-World War II era, when critics such as Clement Greenberg laid out the rules for what successful Modernist art should be, "a lot of stuff was left out."

In some ways the curator's task resembles the critic's. An unremitting and unrealistic attentiveness to the new is required, along with continuous self-instruction in what has come before. Curator and critic both attempt to find meaning within a realm of shifting standards. Curators, however, must choose what to show: They perceive certain connections, imply value of some kind, decide what is worth looking at and why.

But the mainstream critic is limited to what museums and galleries offer, usually in a given geographic area. Critics who wish to encourage local production of art while also raising questions regarding value must walk a very fine line. Not judging is the easiest path. Moreover, philosophical support for not judging is easy to find.

When artists inevitably rebelled against the dictates of Modernism and tried out a number of alternatives, critical thought also changed course. Lumped under the catchall title of post-

modernism, much of the theory became incestuously entwined with the new work, a development that the Modernists have much to answer for. Piece after piece could not be understood except as an expression or extension of theory. And for that, a viewer often had to look outside the work itself. Thus Robert Melee's recent output did not intrinsically divulge that his mother was the subject—literally a piece of work. The movement continues to affect art students, many of whom can be observed trying to work out its premises in forms lame and lamer.

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For postmodernists, grand pronouncements are beyond contemplating, since master narratives are all suspect, and every attempt at assigning values betrays a form of hierarchical thinking (e.g. Mozart is better than Madonna) that serves the interests of the powerful. The critic who attempts to judge under such circumstances is at best uninformed, at worst a lackey of those better left unnamed. Yet while postmodernism's chief assumptions have lately been under assault, little in the way of a bigger, better idea has come to take their place. We might say no to postmodernist thought while feeling unclear on what we might instead say yes to.

Postmodernist ideas have influenced curators as well as artists, of course, and with some positive effects. More women and black artists have broken through, as have aspirants with no classical training. But attempts by museums and galleries to appear more inclusive are not all they may seem, for in the end choices

must still be made. New hierarchies will be unavoidably established. Often the "de-skilled," the shocking and the simply baffling are raised up in what is finally a parody of the democratic impulse. The sometimes-comical result is that art exhibitions, claiming to have trampled on the distinction between "high" and "low" art, instead have cemented it.

Unable to "read" the objects or enterprises offered up for their inspection, bewildered viewers are apt to decide the problem is with them: Perhaps the surest way to know that a thing is art is if you cannot understand it. For such audiences, art by definition remains high art. They know that the true low art of our time flourishes safely off the premises, at neighborhood arts-and-crafts fairs and at the local multiplex. No matter how much theory we throw at it, the distinction between high and low art resists erasure. Critics who duck this problem only increase their travails.

FACED WITH SO many intertwined dilemmas, what's a mainstream art critic to do?

I say, more judging.

I say this with all the authority of your uncle in Abilene, but I say it all the same. The world grows increasingly crowded with representations of reality. Which ones have urgent meaning? Do any of them ensnare us in falsehoods? How shall we know what to prize? These are not idle aesthetic questions but questions intimately bound up with our dreams and our ideas of how to live—ideas that shape our public policies.

The culture wars of the 1990s demonstrated a fierce hunger for a discussion of values. Unfortunately, when the skirmishes involved the visual arts, crude judgment frequently rushed in to fill a void. With forthright critical discussion of artistic values so routinely lacking, defense of free speech became the fallback position. And it ended up sounding surprisingly feeble. It is not only the curious viewer who longs for a discussion of values in art; no one craves judgment more than artists themselves. Spend time with a few of them and you will see how true this is. A

thoughtful critique can move and challenge an artist even if it is fiercely rejected.

The best critics will always try to keep themselves open to new work and new ideas. But in the end, a passion for art entails preferring one attempt to another and being able to say why. Without judgment, critics will never convince their editors that the visual arts matter very much. A world of equivalents is nothing to write home about.

All discussions of cultural values impinge on one another. An arts critic writing with some insight about, say, a painter's attempts at self-portraiture can engage those who may not have thought much about painting but have struggled with how to see themselves. Art that challenges the power of museums to pick winners and losers can be shown to resonate with many people's experiences of corporate life. The formal qualities of a piece of sculpture can evoke questions about nature or spirituality.

Critics who pursue such connections should, in the long run, find relief from their perceived burden of having to justify art. Those who succeed will need to be well grounded in the humanities and to keep abreast of all

aspects of culture. But it is just as important for them to see as much actual work as possible. Editors should therefore move heaven and earth to give writers more travel money. Creative ways of doing this might be found by transferring some dollars out of the film budget, for example, or occasionally combining the art critic's role with that of the travel writer.

Editors reluctant to invest should look up the studies. The National Endowment for the Arts' *Survey for Public Participation in the Arts*, conducted roughly every five years, found in 1997 that 68.3 million people—or slightly more than a third of all American adults—had visited an art museum or gallery at least once in the previous 12-month period. It was the highest level of attendance among seven benchmark activities, which included going to concerts and plays. To experience art, unlike TV and even film, people must go out and see it.

EVEN WITH BETTER support from editors, art critics will continue to dwell in an insecure world. If, every time they encounter new work, critics must first grope for a set of standards to apply

(for example, is the work skilled or de-skilled, and how good is it on those terms?), how can they speak with a consistent voice—and therefore some credibility—from week to week?

One answer has been found by Jerry Saltz, the almost compulsively readable art critic for *The Village Voice*. Saltz inserts himself into his work as a kind of art-world Candide, managing to be both insider and outsider at once. The critic-as-character strategy does have limitations, since it sacrifices a clearly worked out aesthetic for something more provisional. In hands as nimble as Saltz's, though, it is rarely boring, and enough to give even the most unschooled reader the courage to go out and look.

Saltz, it turns out, would not dream of not judging. Saying critics should not judge, he once wrote, "is like saying bakers shouldn't bake." Today's art critics must work from an inevitably limited base of knowledge. But so must everyone who lives a life. The critic who does not dare to question Robert Melee's Mommy extravaganza, or try to explain what is wrong with it, might be better off baking pies.

WHEN DRAMATURGS RULED THE EARTH

BY ROBERT BRUSTEIN

ONCE UPON A time in America, theater criticism was a universal practice. During the 1960s and '70s, every newspaper and commercial magazine had regular drama critics, and most small publications and scholarly journals devoted significant space to what was happening in New York City.

At the time, four major newspapers were being published in the city, each with an influential reviewer. True, there were not as many as in previous decades, when seven newspaper critics ruled Broadway. But the shrinking of the newspaper world didn't diminish its fascination with the stage. The pages that *The New York Times* now calls Arts and Leisure were then known simply as the Theatre section, devoted primarily to reports on plays and interviews with playwrights (today, the same pages are largely devoted to features on action movies and warring rap stars). During that period, *The New Yorker*, *Time* and *Newsweek* were growing almost as influential as the dailies; George Jean Nathan was still holding forth in *Esquire*; and even the little magazines were beginning to have some impact.

Before I began reviewing for *The New Republic* in 1959, Stark Young and Eric Bentley had been its well-respected theater critics. Mary McCarthy was scorching theatrical earth for the *Partisan Review*; Richard Hayes was composing very stylish columns for *Commonweal*; Harold Clurman was fulminating brilliantly in *The Nation* and Kenneth Tynan was just beginning his legendary tenure at *The New Yorker*, bringing cosmopolitanism, passion and wit to that magazine's rather empty urbanity. In addition to regular reviews, articles on the theater were frequently being featured in such publications as *Harper's*, *The Atlantic*, *Life*, *Harper's*

Bazaar and *The Village Voice*. And there was also *Theatre Arts Magazine*, a relatively high-circulation journal totally devoted to stories about the American theater.

The beginning of my time at *The New Republic* corresponded with a resurgence of highbrow criticism in a field that most intellectuals had previously scorned. It was a time when young

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Turks at smaller publications were agitating for a whole new kind of theater—engaged, experimental, impudent, irreverent and smart. Broadway had gotten tired. At one time it had combined passion for musical megahits with tolerance for more serious work, whereas now it seemed more and more driven by the box office. If there was any art or intellect to be found in New York theater, you had to look off-Broadway.

I came to *The New Republic* very much under the influence of my predecessor, Eric Bentley, who in 1946 had stunned academics and intellectuals by identifying the playwright as a "thinker." I added my two cents in 1958 with a piece called "The Theatre Is Losing Its Minds," along with some analytical articles on the current Broadway scene for *Commentary* and *Harper's* that pleaded

for higher theatrical standards and greater dramatic complexity. Now I had a visible weekly platform, right next to Stanley Kauffmann's film column, from which to inveigh against the vulgarity and greed of the commercial stage.

My timing was fortuitous, for my very first review, in September 1959, was of an event that proved to be a beacon of the off-Broadway movement, the Living Theatre's production of Jack Gelber's *The Connection*. All of the major newspaper critics had panned this Beckett-inspired play about the narcotic haze of drug addiction. But along with a number of other critics from smaller publications, I found this play to be a breakthrough in its naturalist staging and writing as well as a gauntlet thrown in the face of the whole theater establishment. It was the very opposite of a well-made Broadway artifact; Pirandello-like, it invaded the audience's space, not only breaking through the fourth wall but following you into the lobby. Between Donald Malcolm's review in *The New Yorker* and write-ups in *The Nation* and *The New Republic*, the play managed to catch on and capture an audience—perhaps the first time that small-press reviewers had been able to overturn an unfavorable mainstream judgment.

During the early '60s the most influential drama critic was writing not for the *Times* but for the *New York Herald-Tribune*, namely Walter Kerr. Kerr was an intelligent critic whose eloquent prose style embodied decidedly Philistine views, further limited by his strict Catholic upbringing. Always ready to praise some escapist musical or domestic comedy, he persistently panned anything by the great modernists Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov and Pirandello; totally missed the boat on

Marat/Sade; and declared, after seeing *Waiting for Godot*, that Samuel Beckett was “out of touch with the hearts and minds of the folks out front.”

In short, Kerr was a perfect foil for us young Turks. And our ranks were definitely swelling. The scholar-critic Richard Gilman took over Richard Hayes’s position at *Commonweal* and then left (to be replaced by Wilfrid Sheed) to become the drama critic for *Newsweek*, one of the earliest examples of an intellectual covering theater for a mass magazine.

Gilman left his *Newsweek* job to join my faculty at Yale School of Drama. The lively universalist Jack Kroll took over his position and maintained *Newsweek*’s literate posture, blending Gilman’s intellectual weight with his own populist energies. John Simon wrote serious and scholarly theater reviews for *The Hudson Review* before *New York* magazine encouraged him to sink his fangs into unsuspecting actors and playwrights. Meanwhile, a new periodical called *The New York Review of Books* had appeared during the newspaper strike of 1962-63, started primarily in revolt against the *Times* book review section. The noted literary critic Elizabeth Hardwick became the *New York Review*’s regular biweekly theater critic, writing tough-minded articles that, if somewhat short on theater knowledge, at least treated the stage as a forum that was missing a great opportunity. Susan Sontag replaced Mary McCarthy as the resident theater scold of *Partisan Review*. The scholar-translator Albert Bermel began to review for *The New Leader*. All shared a pronounced distaste for the profit-driven products of Broadway and a desire to endow American theater with some of the quality it had traditionally enjoyed in Europe and Russia.

As theater critics, we were making the same kinds of demands on plays as literary critics were making on books and intellectuals on general culture, questioning the reputations of the enshrined and proselytizing for underestimated new talent. We were feeling our oats and beginning to share our efforts with a much wider public. At the

same time, artists and intellectuals alike were becoming annoyed with the stranglehold maintained on the arts by *The New York Times*, which, despite Walter Kerr’s influence with theater insiders, always had more influence with ordinary theatergoers. Brooks Atkinson’s successor at the *Times*, Howard Taubman, was proving even more tone-deaf than Kerr to the exciting new things that were happening on the New York stage. An impudent new mood was in the air, symbolized by Joe Heller’s

It is one thing to write screeds about the vulgarities and stupidities of a powerful cultural behemoth. It is quite another to take responsibility for the results.

Catch 22, Stanley Kubrick’s *Doctor Strangelove*, Nichols and May, and Paul Sills’ Second City troupe, that was apparently below the threshold of these reviewers. A long advertisement in the *Times*, instigated by Philip Roth among others, called for a radical change in the quality of that paper’s cultural writing, and to everybody’s surprise the editors seemed to take notice.

At least that was how I interpreted the moment in 1965 when I was approached by Clifton Daniels, the *Times*’ managing editor, who inquired whether I might be interested in becoming the paper’s theater critic. Flattered as I was by the proposal, daily reviewing was clearly not in my future. Theater notices in those days had to be completed between the falling of the curtain and the rising of the sun, and I was unable to write that fast. More importantly, though I had no hesitation about speaking my mind from a seat of relative powerlessness, it was quite another thing to be responsible for the potential unemployment of so many

theater workers or the mental health of so many sensitive artists. So I turned down the offer and recommended Stanley Kauffmann for the job.

It was a favor for which he may never forgive me. Stanley was appointed and lasted about a year. After a highly contentious season, in which he annoyed Broadway producers by asking to review previews, he was replaced by Walter Kerr, responding to the *Times*’ invitation to leave the *Herald-Tribune*. The revolt was over. A few years later, the *Times* would consolidate its return to traditionalism when Kerr moved to the Sunday section and the paper’s dance critic, Clive Barnes, took over the daily post.

The ’60s was also the decade when the resident-theater movement was moving into full gear with the financial aid of the Ford, Rockefeller and Mellon foundations, not to mention the budding National Endowment for the Arts. Barricades were being built between critics from smaller publications and nonprofit theater on the one hand, and the major critics and the commercial stage on the other. My confrontation with Walter Kerr over Jonathan Miller’s production of Robert Lowell’s *The Old Glory* at The American Place Theatre was typical. Kerr dismissed it out of hand. I found it one of the finest of the year and an occasion for rejoicing that a major American poet was writing for the stage. My review concluded with a mock challenge to Kerr: I offered to stop reviewing Broadway musicals if he would agree to stay away from off-Broadway experiments.

Kerr treated my proposal with the disdainful silence it probably deserved. And his attitude was even more lofty when—after abandoning my critic’s job for the next 13 years—I moved to New Haven to start the Yale Repertory Theatre. Kerr wanted to come up and review our productions. I wrote to him that these were essentially the workshop projects of a developing company, and as such should not be subjected to the hit-flop standards of the commercial theater. Would he kindly stay away? Kerr replied, “I will respect your wishes. I wish I could respect your manners.”

Ouch. A few years later, forced by the funding climate to depend more and more on national recognition, I would be humbly begging Kerr to come. He did, and wrote reviews that were rarely more than mildly patronizing.

As for reviewers in cities supporting resident theaters, they were mostly would-be Walter Kerrs who had cut their teeth on pre-Broadway tryouts and Broadway tours. For a while, we tried to foster critics' learning, scholarship, style and knowledge of theater process through a DFA program in drama criticism at Yale. Yet most of our students couldn't find newspaper jobs when they graduated (Michael Feingold of *The Village Voice* was a notable exception), probably because the editors didn't want anyone more informed than their readers. As a result, I finally had to admit defeat and let Yale's criticism program devolve into a program in literary management.

The critics whom I most wanted to evaluate our work—and that of non-profit companies forming all over the country—were my former colleagues. But now that America was finally developing the kind of theater they had been calling for—dedicated to art, not profit, to works of high literary sensibility rather than mere entertainment—those needed to do the work of evaluation were headed elsewhere. Hardwick, Gilman, Sheed and others went back to book reviewing and general critical essays; Sontag became a novelist; and Bentley occupied himself writing plays.

Jack Kroll was a constant visitor and an intelligent analyst of resident theater, though even he was not allowed to review everything he wanted. William A. Henry III, a gadfly of Yale Rep while he was undergraduate theater critic for the *Yale Daily News*, later developed into a very cogent critic of plays produced outside New York for *Time* magazine. John Simon would have come more often if we had provided him with a limousine, but we knew he hated any deviation from a traditional approach to the classics. The others showed very little interest in our work or that of other resident theaters. Indeed, by this point they had mostly

stopped reviewing plays.

It is hard to say with any accuracy why the intelligentsia lost interest in the theater just as it was in the process of reform. One reason, surely, was what many consider to be the collapse of Broadway. It is one thing to write screeds about the vulgarities and stu-

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pidities of a powerful cultural behemoth. It is quite another to take responsibility for the results. For years Broadway had been synonymous with American theater and attracted huge audiences. But now it was buckling at the knees, felled by escalating ticket costs and diminishing creative excitement. Box-office sales had fallen precipitously. The flops outnumbered the hits. The commercial theater was ceasing to create, or even attract, the major stars whose names could keep box offices humming. And even leading playwrights such as Miller, Williams and Albee were finding it hard to get commercial production. If their plays finally did reach Broadway, they were usually panned—and this time not by their old antagonists but by *The New York Times*. Indeed, after 1979, when I had returned as reviewer for *The New Republic*, I felt compelled to defend the same playwrights I had once criticized, sometimes if only to counteract the perfunctory way they were being dismissed by Frank Rich, who had developed unprecedented power as the latest critic for the *Times*. Combining Atkinson's gravitas with Kerr's show-biz savvy, along with a bit of Simon's vituperation, Rich was becoming known as the Butcher of Broadway.

There had always been something

vaguely parasitical about our critical feeding off of big Broadway reputations. We needed them, not just to exercise our vocabulary of scorn but to provide us with a negative context. We also needed their reflected glamour. (In an article called "Ann-Margret and the Critics," Rocco Landesman, a theater aficionado before he became a Broadway producer, shrewdly analyzed the motives of small-publication critics, saying that we were secretly as starstruck as anyone else.)

I suppose I was naive to believe that the new resident-theater movement could attract the kind of critical minds commensurate with its ambitions. First of all, who would provide these New Yorkers with travel money for trips to Minneapolis, Louisville or any of the other "remote" places where plays were being produced? *Partisan Review*? *The New York Review of Books*? From time to time, my own theaters—first the Yale Repertory Theatre and then the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge—invented pretexts for intelligent writers to come see our work, though rarely in their capacity as critics. We invited the likes of Lizzie Hardwick, Harold Clurman, Eric Bentley, and Susan Sontag to lecture, direct, or write plays. Michael Feingold, Albert Bermel and Stanley Kauffmann spent time with us in Cambridge as adapters, translators or panelists. None of these eminent people ever wrote about any of our productions or, to my knowledge, those of any other resident company outside of New York.

Instead, the work of my theater and of similar ones throughout the nation was being reviewed by the local media, who were applying the same standards to Shakespeare and Beckett as to the commercial claptrap being shuttled to and from a greatly weakened Broadway. In an article called "Where Are the Repertory Critics?" I called for a new kind of critical mind, one capable of recognizing that a resident theater was not a show shop turning out hits and flops but rather a living organism of artists developing alongside audiences. I begged for the critic who could recog-

nize that the actor he praised in *Waiting for Godot* may have been the same one he had panned the previous week in *Twelfth Night*, that there were links between plays and performances capable of being appreciated by a discerning intelligence. Most of the local reviewers I spoke to about this issue complained that they lacked the space and/or the editorial support to offer anything more than snap judgments and a synopsis of the plot.

My final effort to change the prevailing intellectual climate took place in 1992, when the American Repertory Theatre ran a symposium on critics and criticism. The weekend symposium was intended as an opportunity for a number of critics to sit on panels with theater artists and, through discussions about the nature of American theater criticism, air their disagreements. Following an amiable keynote address by Benedict Nightingale, former Sunday critic for *The New York Times*, the blood began to flow. Frank Rich had been invited but declined—wisely, no doubt, since he turned out to be a major target. There had been, for example, a backstage feud going on between him and Jack Kroll ever since Rich anointed him with the title Jack-the-Hype, an appellation Kroll took the opportunity to rebut in public. Jules Feiffer took ferocious exception to John Simon's exceptional

ferocity, and both engaged in the kind of rough-and-tumble rarely displayed outside of gladiatorial combat. And Kevin Kelly of *The Boston Globe*, perhaps because he hadn't been invited, would reserve his own comments for future reviews of our work.

Looking back, though, I believe this was a very healthy act of catharsis that, without perhaps changing any minds, demonstrated the fact that there were alternatives to the prevailing system of reviewing. The event also showed that if there was discontent with the state of American theater, there was also considerable dissatisfaction with its criticism.

Did anyone care? Certainly, to judge by the dwindling amount of space being devoted to plays in newspapers and magazines, interest in the theater was diminishing among the general public. *Time* and *Newsweek* had virtually dropped their regular drama coverage. The last theater article I can remember being published in *Harper's* was a screed aptly called "Theaterophobia" by the movie critic David Denby. After Frank Rich abandoned daily criticism to become an op-ed writer, the *Times* lost much of its interest in the theater, as well as some of its power, and at present has given up its Sunday theater column as well. *The New Yorker* continued to cover theater—mainly when John Lahr, who spends half his year in London, got

a chance to praise some English import—but in a desultory way. Even *The Village Voice* cut down its once-hefty reviewing staff. The heyday of American theater criticism seemed to be officially over.

I'm not foolish enough to ring death knells for the American theater or for American theater criticism. Somehow, people of extraordinary talent—playwrights, directors, actors, composers, designers—continue to work against the odds. And there are still people of intellect, writing for Internet organs like HotReview (Jonathan Kalb) or in cheeky journals like *The New York Sun* (Jeremy McCarter), or even for mass-circulation dailies like *Newsday* (Linda Winer), who are responsive to the more adventurous expressions of the form. In academic journals, Elinor Fuchs and Arthur Holmberg are always worth reading for their scholarship and wit.

Whether these people will manage to establish the kind of influence enjoyed in the past is doubtful. But if there is one thing we have learned over time, it is that theater criticism cannot simply be the negative expression of a disgruntled voice railing at lifeless objects. It has to recognize, endorse, and advance the possibilities of renewal. Without this, criticism becomes simply another mode of performance, and the critic another actor gesticulating in the void.

THOUGHTS ON ARCHITECTURE CRITICISM

BY ROBERT CAMPBELL

MY FAVORITE DEFINITION of a critic is by the French author Anatole France, who wrote, “A good critic is one who describes his adventures among masterpieces.”

That’s the ideal. Good criticism isn’t a judicial system or a system of punishment. As a critic, you shouldn’t be primarily a member of the taste police. You should be a fan, an appreciator, an enthusiast, someone able to awaken your readers to the wonder of the world as it is as well as the wonder of how much better it could become. My favorite example in any field is the American critic Randall Jarrell, who wrote about poetry with a sense of shocked and delighted discovery. It’s easier to raise people’s standards by admiring what’s good than by knocking what’s bad.

Architectural criticism is in some ways unique. Other critics are, to a large extent, consumer guides. They help you decide which play to see, concert to attend, book to read or restaurant to try. Architecture is not “consumed” in the same way. Except in the case of an occasional spectacular and heavily hyped new art museum, we don’t normally buy a ticket to see a building. The question, therefore, is why have architecture critics at all? What is their purpose?

I think it is to stimulate a conversation in society about what constitutes a good place for human beings to live and work in. A work of architecture must always be understood as a contributing part of something larger than itself. It’s rare that it can usefully be evaluated as an isolated art object.

For that reason, I think architecture critics go astray when they imitate critics of other arts. The experience of works of art other than architecture is normally a

“framed” experience. When you look at a painting, you see it in a frame. It is framed off in space. When you go to a movie, it begins and ends. It is framed off in time. Buildings, however, are framed neither in time nor in space. They exist in relatively stable relation to their spatial context, especially the con-

It is the quality of the world of interactive spaces that matters most, not the aesthetics of this or that individual building.

text of other buildings. And they exist indefinitely in time.

It’s helpful to remember that this used to be true of painting as well. Before the Renaissance, a painting invariably existed in some permanent relation to a cultural and physical context. Perhaps it was an altarpiece, integral with its church, meant not as an artwork to be appreciated in isolation but rather as an illustration of the meaning of Christianity. Or it was a mural, or a floor mosaic, or a decorative frieze, all of them permanently attached to some larger place and system of values.

Then it dawned on someone in the Renaissance that you could take the painting off the wall, frame it, sign it and send it out to the marketplace, where it could be sold. Painting changed forever. Now you could talk about an Uccello or a Kandinsky as a commodity, as a brand-name product.

Something similar has happened

more recently to architecture. It too has become frameable and signable. We have found a way to rip the building out of its context in time and space. The change here, of course, came with the arrival of contemporary media, especially with the invention of photography in the nineteenth century and the rise, starting about 1930, of architectural photography as a profession of highly skilled practitioners. Photography is the removal of context. A photograph of a work of architecture frames it off from the world and freezes it at a single moment in time.

We now live in a culture so pervaded by media that we barely notice it. It is a world of framed images in our magazines, on our screens, and increasingly in our imaginations. We have therefore come to think of buildings as we think of paintings. We think of them as existing not in a specific time and place, but in the worldwide media stream of images.

I’m often reminded, in this connection, of the Smith house, designed by the architect Richard Meier and built in the mid-sixties on the coast of Connecticut. I’ve never been there, and neither has anyone else I know. But it is familiar to every architect in the world, at least those of my generation, through photographs by the great architectural photographer Ezra Stoller.

In this case, it seems to me that the image, not the house, is the end product of the design process. The house becomes merely a means to the image. The image is a far more potent and influential presence in world culture. Inevitably, once that’s realized, architects begin to design with an eye to the eventual photograph.

Art exists in order to be appreciated. It is a grave error, but one commonly

made by critics and others, to believe that buildings exist primarily for the same reason. A building is a work of art too, but of a different kind. Which brings me to my own definition of architecture. It's this: Architecture is the art of making places. The places may be rooms and corridors, or streets and squares, or gardens and golf courses. As far as I'm concerned, they're all architecture, because they are all places made for human habitation.

And that's how you experience architecture: You inhabit it. You don't merely look at it or walk around it. You *inhabit* it—either literally with your own body or figuratively with your imagination—as you look up, perhaps, at a window and imagine yourself to be inside looking out.

You inhabit with all your senses. Think of a visit, let's say, to a church in an Italian hill town. You enter the church, and suddenly the air is cool and humid. The ache in your knees speaks of the steps you have climbed to get here. The intense sun outside is replaced by the shadowy cave of the church. Sound here is more hushed, yet more reverberant. You hear a motorcycle start up outside, making you feel how intensely you are inside. You're starting to smell the candles now. Light draws you toward the altar. As you move across the floor, you realize it's been carved into a kind of landscape by many people walking over time. And as you move, you begin to have the primal experience of architecture—perceiving that space configures and reconfigures around you as you move through it.

Not too much of that experience is purely visual. Yet in the media culture, we pretend to ourselves that framed images can wholly represent places.

There are, of course, some kinds of art that resemble architecture in being unframed. Installation art is precisely a reaction against the framed object on the white and placeless museum wall. Such art interacts with its context. One thinks, for example, of Donald Judd's work in Marfa, Texas, where his art is inextricably involved not only with the preexisting town, its landscape, and its history as a military base, but also with

the living and working quarters of the artist. But such works are very much the exception. Most art is framed off. Most art is also useless. Indeed, Robert Rauschenberg defines art as that which has no use. But architecture can neither be framed, nor can it (with rare exceptions) be useless.

Buildings exist in relation to other buildings. Together they shape the spaces, both indoors and out, in which we live our lives. It is the quality of the world of interactive spaces that matters most, not the aesthetics of this or that individual building. As the Luxembourg architect Leon Krier has suggested, when an architect designs a building he or she should think, "I am making a piece of the whole world."

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It is the shift from thinking about architecture as the making of places to thinking of it as the making of frameable aesthetic objects that has made architectural criticism so much more problematic today than in the past. It is possible to establish criteria with which to evaluate the quality of a place. But it is difficult, to say the least, to assess the merit of an arbitrary formal exercise. As a result, there is today no consensus about what "good" architecture is.

That wasn't always true. The profession of architectural criticism as now practiced was begun by Ada Louise Huxtable, the *New York Times* critic from 1963-82. There had been a couple of notable predecessors—Montgomery Schuyler in many publications from 1880-1914 and Lewis Mumford in *The New Yorker* in the 1930s and 1940s—but Huxtable was the first full-time professional architecture critic writing for a newspaper.

Huxtable knew her values and

expressed them emphatically. And the *Times* encouraged definite opinions. She recalls that the editor who gave her the job, Clifton Daniel, would often say in the early days, "Make up your mind, Ada Louise. Make up your mind." Huxtable had little difficulty in doing that, because she was a dedicated modernist. She wrote in an era when modernism was still fresh, and the battle to establish it over historic styles was still in progress. The pale ghost of early modernism's social agenda, based on socialist political beliefs, was still present. So was the movement's infatuation with the machine.

Huxtable was the public voice of the modernist consensus in American architectural culture. She was also, coming as she did from an art history background, a dedicated preservationist who despised new buildings that revived older styles. When, in 1970, she won the first Pulitzer Prize ever given in the field of criticism (and later, in 1981, received a MacArthur Fellowship), she solidified the status of architecture criticism as a beat for major newspapers.

Today the old modernist unanimity has disappeared. New styles of architecture now appear every few years and enjoy a brief run of fashion. They then fail to disappear. We've seen styles called postmodernism, deconstruction, blob architecture, modernist revival, new urbanism and neoclassicism. We've seen notable architects become fascinated with, among many other themes, tectonic-plate movement, linguistic analysis, fractal geometry, climatic sustainability and junk materials as primary sources for architectural form.

We've seen a revival of architecture's being perceived as an elitist cult activity to be appreciated only by the knowing, in-group aficionado. We've witnessed, by contrast, a powerful reversion to the traditional, a move that is certainly a reaction against the confusion and, to many people, incomprehensibility of contemporary styles. An example would be a place like Princeton, which is now anxious to restore the "brand image" of the school as established by its neo-Gothic architecture of 100 years ago. And we've also seen, in the work of someone like

the Dutch architect and writer Rem Koolhaas, a kind of slummer's delight in the worst excesses of populist, capitalist sprawl development.

In this swamp of multiple and arbitrary viewpoints, where does the critic find a place to stand? It's no longer possible to be, as Huxtable was, the voice of a clear consensus that believed in itself with an almost messianic fervor. In the absence of a fixed set of values against which to appraise a building, how does a writer make value judgments? What, to ask the question once again, is the purpose of an architecture critic?

I would argue that the only answer to that question is to abandon our habit of looking at architecture as a frameable art like painting, and to see it again, as we did before photography, in a larger context. We have to reach outside architecture to find the values by which to judge it. It sounds corny to say, but it's time to remember that architecture is about how we should live on our planet. It is about where we live, not what we look at. I suggest that the future of architecture lies in re-attaching it to these larger issues.

You can summarize these issues with the one word "health"—personal health, social health and planetary health. Architecture can, for example, help keep us from being obese by creating walkable, bikeable communities, or by offering enticing public stairs instead of hiding them behind the elevator, or by keeping us in touch with the natural world. It can help preserve democracy by creating settlement patterns that draw different kinds of people into public places where they mix, meet and learn about one another's concerns. It can help preserve the planet by curbing the kind of mindless sprawl development that destroys nature while poisoning the atmosphere and maximizing consumption of planetary resources.

Spelling out those aims is the work of another essay. The purpose of this one is to point a way out of the current mess of values-free aestheticism. The role of architectural criticism, unlike that of other kinds, is to make connections between architecture and other values. Or as Columbia University President

Lee Bollinger put it in a spring 2003 talk on journalism in general, it is to mediate between confused experts on the one hand and common sense on the other.

In no way do I mean to play down the purely architectural merits of buildings. We can all delight in mastery of metaphor, craftsmanship, invention, light and space, and in the way a building, like a poem, can comment on its predecessors and thus join the great narrative of architecture history. There is all this and much else besides. But those joys aren't enough.

The critic should come as close as possible to drowning in sensual experience, only then striking out for the shore of some kind of formulation.

Nor do I suggest that the critic approach a building with some kind of predetermined checklist of qualities against which it should be measured. Not at all. As I suggested in the fantasy of visiting an Italian hill town, your first duty as a critic is to immerse yourself in the work. Values have to be placed on hold while you do that. A building can be good in ways that never would have occurred to you until you were there. The critic should come as close as possible to drowning in sensual experience, only then striking out for the shore of some kind of formulation.

But when the formulation comes, it must be to place the building within the framework of a larger world of values. As the landscape architect Reuben Rainey once eloquently put it, "Design is, in essence, giving form to value." That has always been true. The world we build is a readable graph of the values of the people who create it. Often it's a graph of power. When the king is in charge, the palace is the biggest building. When it's the cardinal, it's the cathe-

dral. When it's democratic government, it's the capitol. When it's the corporation, it's the office tower.

Take office towers: One may think of them, especially ones built in recent decades, as being inexpressive of values. They are simple boxes of leasable space. They look like the carton the real building came in. But that, of course, is precisely the value they broadcast so eloquently: that what matters in the world is commerce and nothing more. Where the party-hatted spires of older skyscrapers like the Empire State and Chrysler Buildings were a metaphor for a kind of joyous individual aspiration under capitalism, the boxtops of today speak of a more collective, anonymous corporate culture.

That's just one example. Architecture is always eloquent, not just a slide show. We should be asking, though, whether it's eloquent about the values that matter long-term. Only when we ask that question will we recover from our infatuation with each passing visual style.

The British critic J. M. Richards once wrote, "Architecture cannot progress by the fits and starts that a succession of revolutionary ideas involves. Nor, if it exists perpetually in a state of revolution, will it achieve any kind of public following, since public interest thrives on a capacity to admire what is already familiar and a need to label and classify."

We must ask architects to first imagine a better world and then supply the buildings that will help to create it. Buildings must be placed, and understood, within a web of larger values. When that happens, the public—some of whom suspect that architects have "revolutionary values" and subscribe to a private set of aesthetic beliefs nobody else understands—may once again become appreciators and supporters of good architecture.

In its landmark 2001 study *The Architecture Critic*, the National Arts Journalism Program came up with some sobering facts. Of the 40 critics surveyed, 32 disagreed with the statement, "Generally speaking, we can be proud of the new built environment we have

developed over the past 25 years.” Of the 10 American buildings the critics liked best, none was completed later than 1939, an amazing 65 years ago. I don’t fully agree; I would certainly place the Kimbell Museum in Fort Worth, by Louis Kahn, on that list. But the larger point is true. For all the fuss over isolated avant-garde works like Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, nobody

really believes we are living in a great era of architecture.

When we succeed in reconnecting architecture to the needs and values of the larger world, that disbelief will end. So will the skepticism of the public. Interest in architecture will grow. So will the number of architecture critics, now pathetically few.

The critics who responded to the

NAJP survey understand this. Much of their writing crosses the border between architecture and broader social and environmental issues such as ecology, sprawl, urbanism, planning and preservation. Like President Bollinger’s journalists, they are seeking to mediate between expertise—in this case, that of the architects—and the common sense of the larger public.

THE FINE ARTS ON TV

BY DONALD MUNRO & JOSHUA SEFTEL

THE WOMAN'S LIPS are lush and insistent. "I confess I love that which caresses me," they say. The tightly framed shot of her face is a pretty good way to snare your garden-variety channel surfer. Her mouth is full and sensuous, her voice dramatic and beckoning. "Stand up and look at me, face-to-face, friend-to-friend," the lips continue. And even though we simply see a person talking—no sex, no violence, none of the frenetic stuff to which television audiences are said to be addicted with the passion of crack addicts—there's something about the intensity of her delivery that makes the moment compelling. Even the most disinterested observer might linger.

Can TV cover the fine arts? Sure it can. But it's so rare we've almost forgotten it can be done. As the lips segment continues, it's a mystery as to what it's all about until we are introduced to Robert Pinsky, a former United States poet laureate, framed in a more standard interview shot in which we can see his entire face and upper body. "The medium for a poem," he says, "is breath."

Yes, the subject is poetry. On *television*. This piece—on WGBH-TV's acclaimed *Greater Boston Arts*, which features people from all walks of life reciting the words of Sappho and others—is devoted to what some would consider to be among the least telegenic of topics. You can almost sense the casual channel surfer, for whom fine-arts coverage on television is synonymous with stuffy *Masterpiece Theatre* reruns and poorly lighted ballet recitals, recoiling in horror. How dare this show be so intriguing—and so fluent in the language of television—that it tricks me into watching something about poetry?

It would be nice to think that poetry is being covered in seductively creative ways on television all across the country.

Of course, such a claim would be pure fiction. For the most part, TV simply ignores such subjects as theater, dance, visual arts and—God forbid—poetry. And when the attempt is made, it often falls flat. A fixed camera tries to capture a theater performance. A dancer keeps getting lost on a dark stage. A large and resonant painting looks flat and unin-

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teresting on the small screen.

"I think that arts programming on commercial television doesn't necessarily work," says Shari Levine, a vice president and executive producer at Bravo. "It just doesn't have a big enough audience. We've done opera in prime time—the viewer wasn't interested."

Though Levine says there aren't hard statistics available on how much Bravo has shifted away from fine-arts offerings in the last five years, she notes that the network—which is home to such shows as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*—now positions itself as a mainstream-entertainment channel. Even when audiences do flock to, say, *The Three Tenors* on PBS, most of their members are over 55—not the sort of viewers that commercial networks crave.

Charles M. Gray, a professor of economics at the University of St. Thomas

in Minneapolis, says general television coverage of the arts has decreased over the past decade. Even classical music—one of the fine arts thought to be best-suited to television—dropped 8 percent in terms of media-participation rates between 1992 and 2002, as compared to 1982-1992. The 2002 *Survey of Public Participation in the Arts* indicated that only 18 percent of the population, or 37 million people, viewed a classical music performance at least once on TV, video or DVD in a 12-month period. "We can presume that the media, by and large being a for-profit media, don't see there's a profit in this," says Gray, citing a study he and Joni Maya Cherbo conducted for the National Endowment for the Arts based on the 2002 survey. "And the non-profit media became a smaller percentage of the total."

So much for the giddy assumption, when cable first appeared, that more channels would mean better coverage of such niche markets as the fine arts. How much "A" is left in the A&E network these days?

As for network TV, you can pretty much forget about it, except for such holdovers as the venerable *Sunday Morning* show on CBS, which still manages to work in an arts-related segment most weeks.

On one hand, some think that the less arts coverage on TV the better, simply because the medium can't do justice to the subject. "Normally television—even public television—should be kept as far away from art as a convicted child molester should from a neighborhood playground," wrote Christopher Knight, a fine-arts critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, in 2003. "Mass culture thrives on piety, genuine or fake, and piety suffocates art." Others say it might be more useful to think of television not as a sub-

stitute for experiencing the arts firsthand, but more as a preview. For no matter how inferior it is to the real thing, it can pique the interest of the audience. Gray's research also indicates a strong link between media exposure and attendance at live events; someone who'd seen an orchestral performance on TV was thus more likely to attend a live concert.

Then there's the issue of the arts requiring context and background, especially among audience members who didn't have childhood exposure through their parents or from a strong educational influence. "Arts are complex things to consume," Gray says. "They're not like potatoes and meat. We have to develop what you might call 'consumption skills.' The media can be an important piece of that."

Something's better than nothing, it seems.

Are there any art forms that TV is able to portray well? While classical music and opera can sometimes adequately translate, theater is a challenge. The exception might be plays with very small casts; an Albee drama might come across better than a play by Shakespeare. The visual arts are difficult, too. "If I were a painter, I would cringe to see my work on video," says Boston choreographer Caitlin Corbett. Then again, she adds, capturing live dance on TV isn't exactly a breeze either: "How can you? It flattens the essence of it."

At one low-budget extreme, dance can seem terribly static on television—faraway and disengaged—with one or two fixed cameras providing almost perfunctory visuals. At the other end of the spectrum, though, TV's penchant for the close-up can destroy its overall look and feel. "Then you're missing all the choreography because you have to look at the sexy dancer," says Corbett, whose Caitlin Corbett Dance Company juxtaposes everyday movement with cutting-edge modern dance. "You wind up not doing justice to the work."

Corbett says the best dance pieces she's seen on TV are those in which the videographer collaborates with the choreographer instead of taking a purely

documentary approach. That collaboration includes a long pre-shooting discussion, so the videographer understands the dance well before filming begins. "When you're really able to see dance is when you aren't trying to treat it as a live art," she says. Then again, Corbett adds, the bigger the budget, the better the chance that a visually sophisticated mainstream audience will pay attention. "Equipment has everything to do with it," she says. "Lighting has everything to do with it. The higher-end production you have, the better it's going to be."

Stephanie Stewart, the series producer of *Greater Boston Arts*, says that lately it's become more of a challenge to

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raise money for arts segments on her show. "It takes an enormous amount of perseverance to continue making arts for television, given that arts do not garner large audiences and so need to be justified on other, non-market-driven terms," she says. "Even in public broadcasting, making this case just keeps getting harder." And while the cost of production has come down in recent years—shooting and editing are cheaper by meaningful margins—Stewart notes that experienced producers may be forced out of the business if their salaries are cut too severely, causing production values to suffer.

You can't help but imagine, then, that if enough resources were put into covering the fine arts on TV, almost anything could look good—from the stuff-

est opera to a segment on the most static of sculptures. Think about how much money a television network puts into broadcasting a professional football game—the myriad cameras, the top-notch direction, the fancy graphics. Compared to the craft and expense of such endeavors, arts programming, for the most part, is like a Friday-night high school football game televised on cable access, using a stationary camera from the press box. Such a presentation might get the job done for die-hard fans and the players' parents, but for everyone else, it's so unappealing you can't move your remote finger fast enough.

Yet TV can pull through despite its limitations. Programs such as *Sunday Morning*, *Greater Boston Arts* and the cancelled *Egg* have regularly transformed the fine arts into compelling television. Yo-Yo Ma's six-part *Inspired by Bach* film series, coproduced by PBS, racked up awards at the Berlin and Venice film festivals. The PBS series *Art: 21* garnered strong reviews for producers Susan Sollins and Catherine Tatge and director Charles Atlas, who "let the artists do the talking on their own behalf, both in the studio and at various exhibition venues," Christopher Knight noted in an *L.A. Times* review.

Sometimes it's about finding a strong narrative in an arts story, such as when *Sunday Morning* delved into the mystique of the Baroque painter Artemisia Gentileschi, who became the It Girl of the art world after interest in her was sparked in the 1980s. The result was strong on biography—including the scandal of what reads today like a modern-day date rape. With such a fascinating character, the story had extra "zip," says executive producer Rand Morrison.

At other times, it's about using the very limitations of the subject matter to make a compelling visual story. Consider when *Greater Boston Arts* chose to do a piece on a postage-stamp exhibition. When the producer and cameraman arrived at the gallery a few days before the exhibit was to open, they found a harried curator, a room with blank walls, and postage stamps all over the floor. There was nothing to film.

The producer ran to the store and

bought a large magnifier while the cameraman dug through the back of his van and found a pane of clear glass. They laid the stamps on the pane, placed the curator on one side with the magnifier in her hand, and shot the interview through the glass. The result was a visually arresting interview that featured the artwork in the foreground and the curator in the background, playfully distorted by the magnifier as she spoke about the stamps.

And then there's poetry. If WGBH can make it look good, isn't there hope?

Even by the finicky standards of a medium that values the visual above all else, the *Greater Boston Arts* segment on poetry comes across as good television. When the first woman—with those compelling lips—recites the opening line, the image itself draws the viewer in.

There's no doubt that the pull of this piece, and of others created for the series, is visual. We drink in the details on the very real faces we see in front of us: the

odd-shaped nose of a man, the big plastic-rimmed glasses of a woman, the silver hoop earring caught in a sliver of one

You can't help but imagine, then, that if enough resources were put into covering the fine arts on TV, almost anything could look good.

frame. People are drawn to people.

Stewart, at WGBH, never stops thinking about the visual, no matter what genre is being presented. For her, that's what sets TV apart. And even though it might make the job tougher, it also makes possible—when the stars and funding align—arts coverage that is

art in itself.

In many ways, fine arts will always be an awkward fit on TV—unless something pretty strange happens to the nation's drinking-water supply and Super Bowl-sized audiences start tuning in to 30-minute segments on disaffected abstract-expressionist painters. In that case, production values would become so lavish that it would be hard *not* to make art exciting. But the hope remains that by taking a creative approach, even a niche market can be nurtured.

"I don't think the good old days are behind us, but I do think we have to come up with some antidotes to the relentless demands of the market when it comes to the arts," Stewart says. "In a celebrity-driven society, can you name a living artist who is a household name? The problem is engendering the interest of a broad audience and of funders despite the fact that no one will get rich from it."

BELOW THE RADAR

COVERING THE ARTS UNDERGROUND

BY DOUGLAS WOLK

A LINE THAT SNAKES AROUND the block for hours leads to a manhole, through which people climb down to an abandoned 19th-century train tunnel filled with a tunnel-themed art-and-video show; no newspaper covers it. More than a thousand people crowd into a warehouse basement in which artists are displaying their work everywhere, musical and acrobatic performances are happening in multiple rooms, and the bar is serving absinthe; no newspaper has even been notified that it's happening. A truck with a sound system pulls up to the front of the public library, and 100 people sitting on the steps abruptly burst into an elaborately choreographed five-minute dance routine, then disperse; organizers are careful not to let the news media know about it. At a "subway party" in San Francisco, a reporter introduces himself as being from *The New York Times*, tries to interview participants and finds himself shunned as a tool of the corporate press.

There's always more interesting art going on in any city than a newspaper has room to cover. Especially in the last 10 years or so, the arts and culture underground has fallen out of touch with newspapers to the point where dailies and even alternative weeklies may not be in the loop about significant artists and events, while the Internet is becoming the preferred source of information for young readers. Artists who operate below the radar may not know how to seek out publicity from traditional print media; they may simply not care about "validation" from the press. In some cases, especially if the circumstances of their work are legally dodgy, they may actively try to avoid press coverage. At the same time, the smart young audiences that newspapers want to court

are increasingly suspicious of them—partly because their cultural world is being ignored. What's a paper to do?

"You can't really cover something unless you have someone who's invested in it," says Jeff Stark, editor of "Nonsense NYC," an e-mail omnium-gatherum of unusual and uncategorizable New York events, which is sent out

"If you're interested in covering the arts, you have to be going out to find them. They don't come and find you."

every week with the note that "you do not have permission to use any of the listings for your commercial publication." Stark has been on both sides of the underground/journalism divide. A former editor at Salon.com, he's also one of the people behind the Madagascar Institute, a wildly inventive Brooklyn arts collective that had never been mentioned in the *Times* until the group's director, Chris Hackett, injured himself and attracted the FBI's attention with an accidental explosion in January 2004.

"If I was a music editor at a major daily," Stark says, "I'd never hire anyone who didn't go out at least four times a week. Journalists can get really lazy—they think they know about a city because they've lived there for a while, and they forget that there are new people arriving and trying new things. If you're interested in covering the arts, you have to be going out to find them. They don't come and find you. Papers should be interested in finding good stories and interesting things that are

happening in their community—at the most basic level that's their job."

Those stories don't often come prepackaged as press releases or as listings from regular advertisers and well-established venues. Flyers—especially in record stores, no matter what medium they're promoting—and word of mouth are the traditional tools of the underground, but new culture is increasingly publicized, discussed and evaluated on the Internet—sometimes on e-mail lists like "Nonsense NYC," sometimes on Web sites. As Robert Kimberly puts it, "An Internet presence is the reverse of a mass mailing: You only have to create it once for anyone to see it."

Kimberly runs a Weblog called "Las Vegas Arts and Culture" that he started in the fall of 2003 to cover his city's scene, which he thinks its newspapers neglect. "This will sound terrible, but I don't subscribe to the local papers," he says. "I don't find anything of interest in them." He launched the site, with free software from Apple and a free account from Blogger, in response to a specific event: Survival Research Labs, the infamous Bay Area robots-and-explosives group, had planned a large-scale performance in Las Vegas, "and a lot of people didn't know about it—and they were people I knew would love it. I thought, this is the final straw."

Heidi Calvert, who runs the multi-purpose art space Bluespace, in Los Angeles, says she doesn't read the papers either, especially for coverage of art, and doesn't have much hope of newspapers' covering her scene anytime soon. "We're just doing it ourselves. The artists go around passing out flyers, and we use Tribe and Friendster and Myspace and Livejournal to promote our events.

Even the *L.A. Weekly* is picky about what they cover—maybe you have to know someone there or you have to be connected with celebrities.”

In Portland, Ore., James Squeaky runs a Yahoo! mailing list, “pdxshows,” for people who want to get the word out about informally organized happenings—mostly music, but sometimes other art events. He notes that the *Portland Mercury*, one of two local weeklies, covers some of the same territory, partly because its music editor is thoroughly keyed into the local scene: “We’re fortunate to have the *Mercury* in Portland, but I haven’t quite figured out how to get those events into good hands at the *Willamette Week*.”

That’s a constant complaint from artists and event organizers who haven’t dealt with print media in the past. They don’t know where to start or whom to call or what form to use for their information, and papers make it difficult to connect with the right person. Some journalists are so lazy they won’t get around to anything that doesn’t come from a paid publicist. Another Portlander, artist and occasional journalist Tiffany Lee Brown, notes that “part of the wall between these events and coverage is simply a presentation issue.” She consulted with the local group 2 Gyrلز Performative Arts to help them understand how to deal with the press for their hard-to-classify “Enteractive Language Festival,” and notes that “with a great deal of determination and focus on the part of the organizers, 2 Gyrلز was able to get some mainstream media coverage for the festival—a lot of which made sense and was accurate.”

But other artists and events producers aren’t so well-equipped. David Cotner, who writes about avant-garde music for *L.A. Weekly*—and sends out a weekly e-mail list, “Actions,” which catalogues experimental performances all over the world—says that “there has to be an editor who’s there for writers to say, ‘Okay, go ahead and run with it.’” And he notes that artists who don’t have regularly scheduled events (and press releases going out on a regular basis) can be a hard sell.

The contents of the “Squid List” rarely overlap with those of the print newspapers. “Just look at what the papers cover,” Beale says. “We’ve got the underground art scene, but San Francisco’s got an established opera, the symphony, SFMOMA [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art]—by the time they’re done with that, they’re not going to drill down to any of the good stuff. I’m sure they’ll be writing about Survival Research Laboratories in 20 years; if Lawrence Ferlinghetti does something now, of

“There has to be an editor who’s there for writers to say, ‘Okay, go ahead and run with it.’”

course it gets written about. To me the newspapers are pretty far away. Especially in cities that have only one paper, there’s such an obligation to cover all that mainstream stuff.”

One source of the problem is that newspapers traditionally have their arts coverage neatly arranged in categories: film, music, theater, visual arts and so on. But a lot of underground art doesn’t fit easily into any section. It can be amorphous and event-based, and it often only happens once. As Beale puts it, “The film critic gets a screener, the drama critic goes to the preview; what do you do with this? If you’re going to cover it, you almost need an ‘other’ section. It’s outside the established art world—the point is not to make money selling it.”

Stark has less patience for newspaper editors who can’t find a spot to cover worthwhile but uncategorizable events: “If it’s that good, make room for it! I’m sorry for that music writer who needs to push their story back a day, or that fifth film that was opening that weekend that isn’t going to get written about, but if you’ve got a good story, run it! I think that we journalists want everything to be in neat little sections, but our readers don’t care as much

about it within the fold of the arts section. Find the space and go with it.”

Conversely, there’s the problem of what to do about artists and events organizers who actively shun publicity—not on ideological grounds but because they’re legally dubious. “House shows—that is, bands playing in someone’s basement—in particular, run into problems with police knowing about them ahead of time,” Squeaky says. Some kinds of events become more open to publicity over time, though. As an example, Beale cites Santacon, the tradition of having dozens of people in Santa Claus suits running amok across a city: “In the early days we definitely didn’t want any press—we had a lot of problems with the cops back then. Now I think police departments know about it and don’t care.”

In any case, the consensus is that newspapers should try to be respectful of artists’ wishes—and that reporters and newspapers that have demonstrated an ongoing commitment to the underground arts world are much more likely to find their subjects cooperative. “Keep an open mind,” Cotner says. “Don’t have preconceived notions. Know when to keep your mouth shut. And once you get in the community, be friendly—most people are genuinely happy to talk about what they do.” Notes Stark: “The number one thing to do is what MTV did, and what all the magazines that have been successful in getting younger readers have done: *Bring on younger people*. You’ve got to listen to them and let them be part of the news organization. If you want people reading your listings to be smart 23-year-olds who go out a lot, then you’d better have a smart 23-year-old who goes out a lot editing that section.”

It’s also vital to avoid the error of separating coverage of newer, edgier art from a grayer “conventional” arts section. In practice it can make young readers trust newspapers even less. “I hate when newspapers launch those spin-off boutique papers that are supposed to do a better job of reaching out to young people and the arts,” Stark says. “It only ghettoizes them into this

substandard thing, and it ends up looking like a pathetic advertising grab.” Brown also argues for covering everything interesting in the same place: “We have social categories based on

class and education and employment and subculture, and they tend to prevent us from experiencing a wide range of art. I welcome publications and events that get people to crawl out of

their comfortable little boxes. That’s part of the reason I want mainstream media coverage—it opens the doors to people being able to discover something new and possibly mind-blowing.”

