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Anonymity.

An Essay in Three Parts. II.

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All of this is a prelude to an open question about art writing. A kind of consensus has formed that art criticism should not be anonymous. It is a widely held view that any critic who picks up a pen under an assumed name does so with malicious intent. And actually, this is often true, because there are many rewards for writing well about people in the art world, and relatively few for writing cruelly about them. At the same time, it’s often more fun to read something hostile than it is to read something positive.



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Affirmative writing is rarely surprising—all the critic has to do is to try to guess what the artist would like to convey with their work, and then somehow put this into words—but even this is difficult, because a hell of a lot of artists, whether they want publicity or not, don't think that words are adequate to convey anything meaningful about their work. If strings of words would do the job, they'd be writers themselves, and not artists. After all, the material costs are lower, and you can work in a cafe rather than renting a studio.

Art criticism, on the other hand, comes with its costs. Let me tell you a cautionary tale.

There was once a blog that terrorized the Australian art world, with the fairly innocuous title «The Art Life». It first came into existence in 2004 for two reasons, one intentional, one a trigger. The intentional cause was that the author(s) wanted to write every day. The trigger was when a gallery accidentally—as happens from time to time—copied its "bcc" list into "cc". Using the misplaced list of email addresses as a captive audience, the anonymous author(s) would go to a series of gallery openings in Sydney on a warm Thursday night in summer, look at the art, listen to the conversations, and go home and write all sorts of things about what they had seen and heard, and then send them out to the unwary recipients. The results were often hilarious. Sometimes artists perceived themselves as victims because their shows were negatively reviewed, or even worse, dismissed with a few words. However, it was the writing of other established critics in the print media that came under the most sustained fire. One easily identified city newspaper critic, who marked himself out for mockery with his pompous prose, was referred only under the nickname «the esteemed critic», and his own reviews were often quoted from in disparaging tones. Another topic granted exaggerated interest were popular art prizes, such as the Archibald portrait prize, which had a broad following among people who thought abstraction was a bit too modern. The prose was good. At its best, it had something of the sardonic wit of Clive James, perhaps after a few drinks at a family BBQ, combined with the wide-eyed matter-of-factness of a nature documentary, as if the writer(s) really had taken Barnett Newman's comparison of art critics to ornithologists to heart.

The esteemed critic, of course, absolutely hated his tormentor(s). And some of the artists that were reviewed did too. Ex de Medici wrote to the blog, after a negative review, «if I ever see you, I'm going to fucking knife you». It was a threat worthy of Benvenuto Cellini, whom Ex de Medici should feel honored to be mentioned in the same sentence as. Unsurprisingly, with such enemies, everybody soon read it. Gallerists read it because it honestly commented on their shows. Artists read it because it pilloried their friends and rivals. People who didn't care about art read it because it was funny. This was a writing that—at least sometimes—fulfilled Brecht's hope of creating an art audience that had the same blood-thirsty attention to detail that could be found amongst visitors to a boxing match. Somewhat like the well-known German theatre review site, Nachtkritik, it rapidly became a source of much greater authority than the feuilleton of the daily newspaper—a fact that did little to reconcile «the esteemed critic»to his unknown archrival.

Peak blog was achieved in 2006, with facetious articles such as «Hole much older than previously imagined by mere humans, leading to unavoidable sense of loss and despair» and «things that didn't happen, the year in review». And then, the inevitable happened: in 2006, the author was offered a TV show, effectively causing the author to be unmasked as Andrew Frost. The anonymity was gone. In exchange for celebrity, he'd blown his own cover. Frosty's genial, slightly professorial appearance did not match the suave savagery of his secret prose alter ego. In person, he was less like the phantom, and more like an awkward

academic. The show, let's be frank, wasn't great. The materialized and real Andrew Frost was, in person, too nice. He watered down his opinions, qualified his judgments, gave artists the benefit of the doubt, and more or less behaved in a way that a decent person should. He gave in to that sickliest of all political temptations. He wanted to be liked. The prose of the website immediately died. The texts no longer had their bite, and when they did go in for criticism, they mostly shot blanks. The website still exists. Nowadays, it is mostly written by writers seeking to establish themselves. The proportion of International Art English has increased in direct proportion to its loss of relevance. Galleries no longer fear it, but rather use it as a place to park their press releases.

As Frost somewhat ruefully says himself, the Schadenfreude that he got out of his reviews has had a pretty long tail. The art world, taken city by city, is pretty small. Even without death threats, there is a more general network problem that is created by its small size—nearly everyone is connected. If you offend an artist, you offend their gallerist, their collectors, and their lover(s). For every enemy that you know you make, you make at least two others whom you don't know, although you'll probably encounter them soon enough. It's only in New York, or London, that the art world is large enough that a counter-phenomena is visible: there, whenever you make an enemy, you at least make a couple of friends, because everyone has so many damn enemies already (it is this secondary network effect that explains the continued existence of Claire Bishop). Frost, though, was in Sydney, and Sydney is not London.

The Art Life's writing had benefited from anonymity; not because anonymity offered the freedom to be cruel, but because it offered something much more precious, the freedom to be stupid. Perhaps the most unbearable obligation of art criticism is that the critic always has to appear to be clever. To maintain their reputation, a critic must see more than the uninformed viewer can in the work. And yet for most critics, as for most sensible people, much contemporary art work calls forth something like a shrug. It's not that it's bad, necessarily, it's just not interesting, or it's interesting in a boring way. With the best will in the world, there's not always a hell of a lot to say about the latest post-punk neo-geo arte povera installation or whatever it is. The diligent art critic could, of course, go out of their way to find something controversial, or supportive, or insightful to say about it, they could even try and find a way to deconstruct it, to critique it as reactionary, derivative or so on, but how refreshing it is to be able to write «I walked into a room and felt nothing».

The Art Life is not alone. The German art website Donnerstag (published from 2010 until 2014), presented a series of editorials by someone in Hamburg called Annika Bender. The name was tremendously well chosen, it was unsonorous enough to be plausible, a name for an accountant, not a participant. No one in the German art world knew Annika Bender, but she seemed to know a lot about them, writing precise, quietly angry takedowns of vacuous shows of post-internet art, and ridiculing rival «respectable» publications, in particular Texte zur Kunst, for all the obvious reasons. It was only after an essay, «Tod einer Kritikerin» (Death of an Art Critic), was published in Merkur that it became clear that Bender did not exist. She had been a construction, a secret pact of two writers who had pooled their individual resentments to create a kind of collective Frankenstein.

As the writers behind Bender argued in the suicide note they wrote for their alter ego, anonymity has a particular potential in the art world because of the low credence afforded to external criticism. External criticism, that is to say, criticism of art from outside the art world can always be dismissed as philistine.The critic who is not int he art world has no traction when they write about its rituals and hierarchies. Parodies by outsiders (such as *The 12 million dollar Stuffed Shark* or *Seven Days in the Art World*) can be read, even enjoyed, by people within the art world without having any impact upon it, because ultimately the critic does not get it, their critique remains superficial, bourgeois. This indifference to external

critique is more characteristic of avant-gardism than any faith in artistic progress, a project that has been abandoned in any case. On the other hand, criticism from inside the art world, from within the network, is either received as doctrine because of the authority of the person delivering it, or fatally compromised by association with some partisan splinter group—that is, by membership in those networks that make art criticism possible in the first place.

Anonymity offers the advantage, therefore, not only that the writer cannot be identified, but more importantly, that they cannot be placed. Criticism that cannot be dismissed based on the identity of the author must be dealt with in other ways. It must be read, and its arguments must be weighed on their merit. Or at least, that's the idea.

There is a real problem with this model of anonymity, one that was already obvious enough in the 18th century: it is extremely difficult to maintain. A mask tends to slip. In an ongoing antagonistic debate, it is hard to justify ongoing anonymity. If the anonymous name themselves, they also need to explain why they had concealed their names in the first place. If they do not, they open their motives to question, and their arguments can be dismissed. Anonymity, it seems, only works if the first exchange is decisive—but this assumes that anonymity is required because the reviews are meant to be contentious, that is to say, negative. Could an anonymous reviewing culture be built on something other than malice? Perhaps only if you have a collective that reviews works not by choice, but by lot. The reviewer does not choose a show but is randomly assigned it. They write not from a position of expertise, but from innocence, and they write not to denounce, but to discover. This would be the anonymous writing of a kind of everyman, an anonymity that is not the product of concealment, but rather of communal authorship. Can the art of our time support close writing from such a collective position? And would such writing inevitably evolve into a kind of gray literature?

Continued in Part II

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