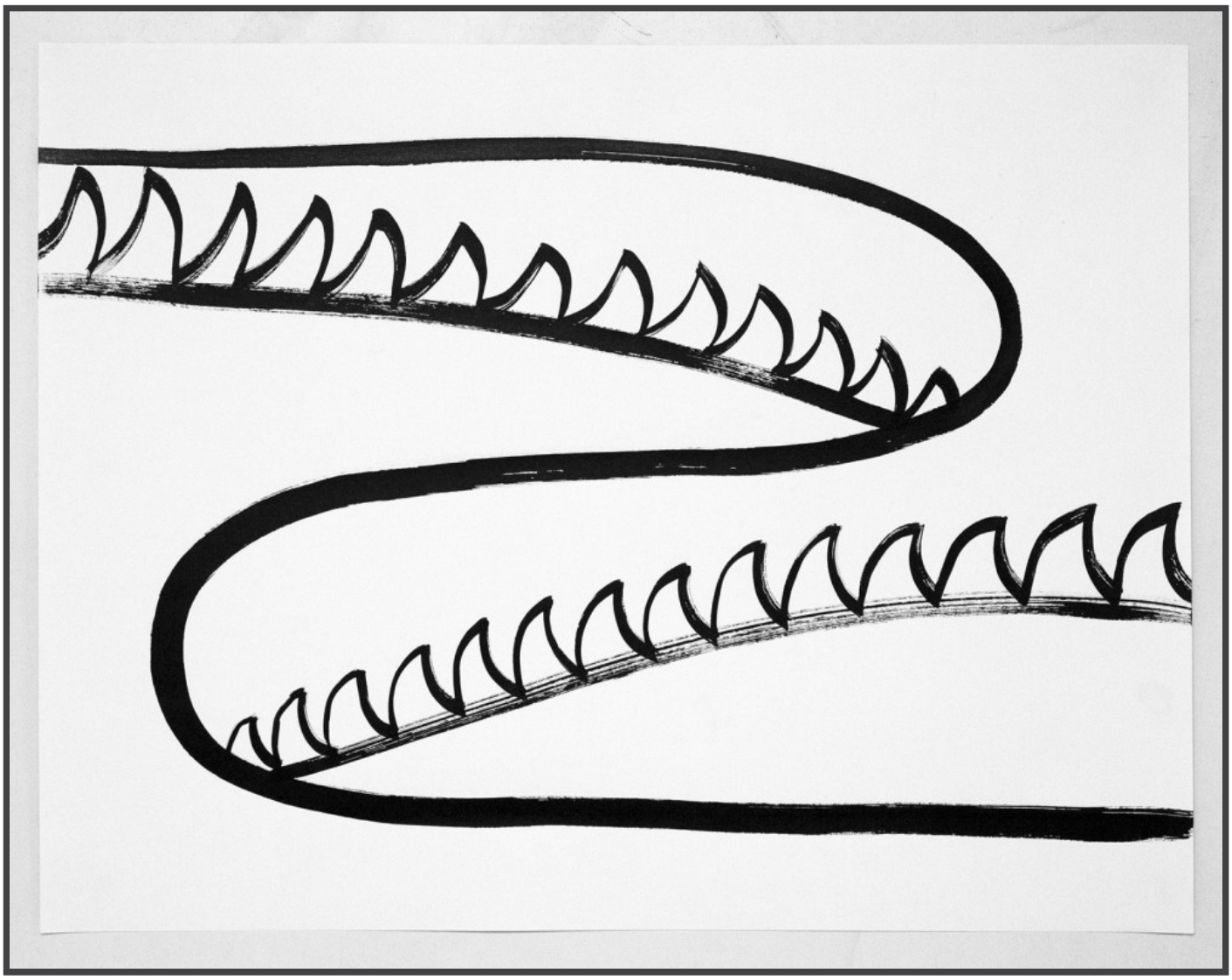
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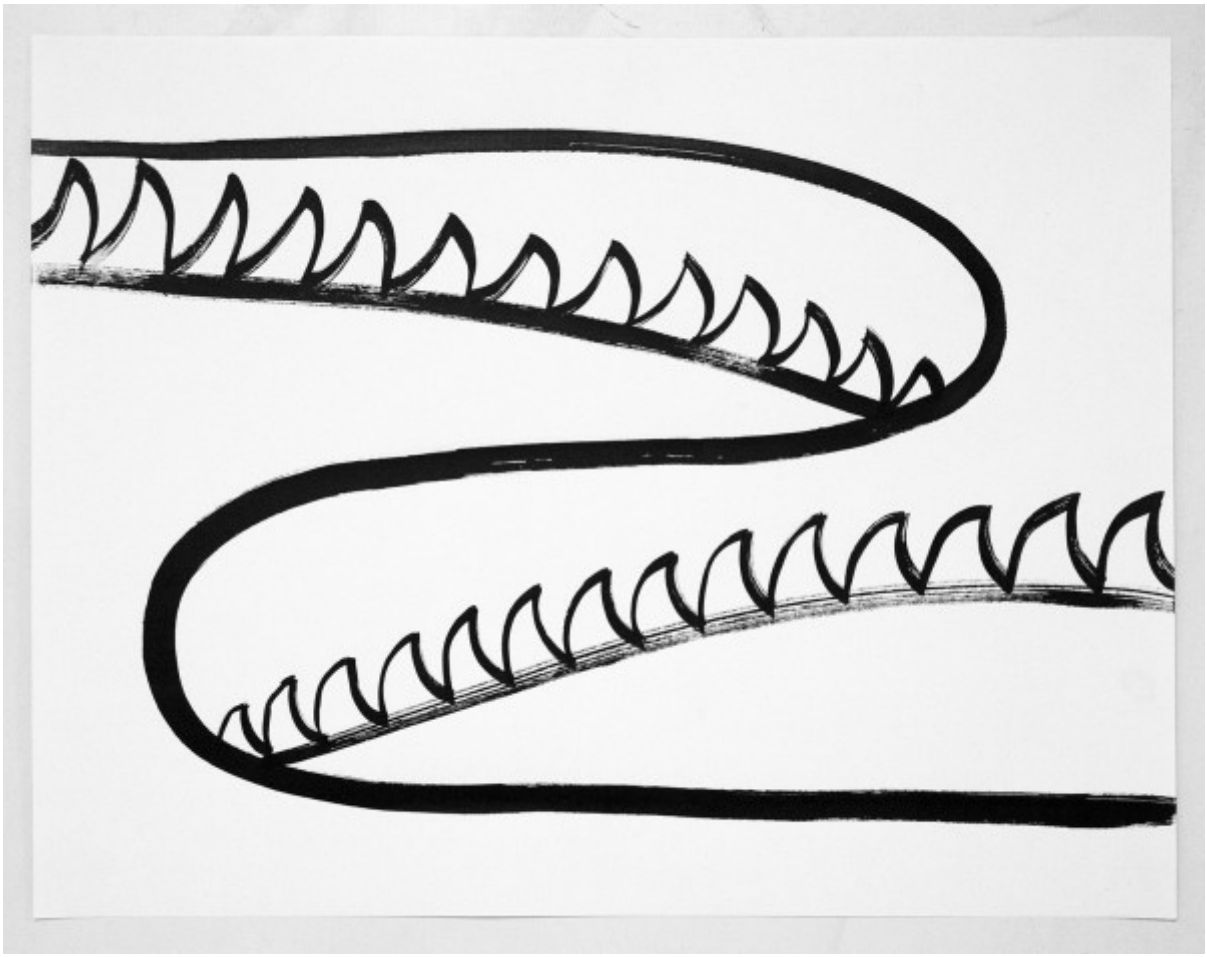
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Critics’ Conversation #2

Adam Jasper, Aoife Rosenmeyer, Brit Barton, Julia Moritz, Mitchell Anderson

Following a conversation in January this year with critics Max Glauner, Helen Lagger and Samuel Schellenberg, in March Aoife Rosenmeyer returned to the subject of practicing contemporary criticism with Mitchell Anderson, Brit Barton, Adam Jasper and Julia Moritz. While these four are active elsewhere as artists, curators, academics and in art mediation, their critical writing is to be found in specialist international art publications on and off-line. This is the discussion that ensued.





Sam Porritt, *Lying In Wait*, 2019, courtesy of the artist and VITRiNE, London/Basel

Aoife Rosenmeyer: Why do you write criticism?

Brit Barton: Writing is an extension of my practice, in the sense that for me writing is almost a form of film-making: establishing a scene and thinking more broadly about what the context of the scene and this exhibition means and any critical implications around that.

Mitchell Anderson: This sounds like I'm trying to act – but probably boredom. It's something that I find interesting and I've had the opportunity to do. It's not to be taken for granted that we've somehow maneuvered our way into having this platform. It also helps me organize my own thoughts about what's going on with the world. We're living in a world that's increasingly against any type of criticality or judgement, everything is just good, and I'm more than happy to say my thoughts if someone cares to read or listen.

Adam Jasper: The really honest answer is that I do it so that I'm compelled to continue to look at art, rather than simply read about it. It's much, much easier for me to sit in a sea of secondary literature. Having the occasional commissioned writing deadline grabs me by the neck and forces me to go stand in a gallery and look at an artwork and have it beat me up for a while.

AR: That strikes a chord.

Julia Moritz: I can agree with everything that's been said. My position is mainly that it helps keep me thinking. It not only helps keep me looking at art, but because curatorial or institutional work in general can be quite logistical and tiresome, writing about things is thinking practice. It's what keeps me creative and, like Mitchell says, we're lucky that people ask us to unleash these thinking exercises onto others and that, to me, seems to be reason

enough to keep doing it. It also means having different conversations with people about their exhibitions. Basically, writing helps me keep up with conversations to which life probably would not allow me to dedicate the time and headspace.

AR: Then what makes it successful? What gives personal satisfaction, or what is the arbiter of successful reviewing?

MA: This is where the artist comes out: this kind of collecting a body of statements thrills me. There's nothing I like more than scrolling through my database of artworks, and there's nothing I like more than sitting for hours and reading everything I ever wrote. Part of that narcissism is also asking: How did my thinking change? How did my writing change? It becomes like a diary of thought.

JM: To me, success is when I get feedback that the conversation between me and the show or the artist or curator has been opened up in such a way that people feel they can become part of it. Maybe that's why reviewing interests me not so much as a means of judgement, but from my educational programming perspective, as really sharing a dialogue about something. Reviews lack a dialogical dimension, so I always try to involve the reader by asking questions or making assumptions and then challenging them, so there's a dynamic that implicates readers, that makes them feel like they're almost there, with a drink in hand at the exhibition like it used to be in pre-Corona times.

BB: After moving here, I wondered what the first Swiss-based exhibition I wanted to discuss in a review/essay format would be and it ended up being the Diane Lawson show at the Kunsthalle Basel. I could talk about Diane Lawson's work, talk about all the things I wanted to, about Switzerland, and Europe, and virtue signaling and institutional due diligence, which was personally satisfying. I wanted to write about all those things, and I used Diane Lawson's exhibition to do it. It wasn't just a passing exhibition that existed for commercial reasons or cultural cachet, but a metaphor.

AJ: In the best of all possible worlds, it would be successful if I could write short reviews that were themselves a kind of literature. If you think of Robert Hughes and his role as a kind of dockyard Shakespeare, whose art criticism is fun to read as prose, even if everything he says is objectionable. The only point at which I have any success is if I see something more at the end of the enterprise than I saw at the beginning. It's really hard to look at art. The more important the work, the more suffering and discomfort it produces. There's a fantastic essay on Jasper Johns whose author – it might have been by Leo Steinberg – says his first encounter with Jasper Johns' Target with four faces (1955) left him with a feeling of boredom, disquiet and discomfort: «The pictures remained with me¬ – working on me and depressing me.» He went back and looked at the exhibition again and he felt the same lingering distaste, unease and restlessness. The discomfort led Steinberg to realize that the work was extraordinary. The text is a kind of exorcism as he tries to work out what it is about Jasper Johns that made him feel so awful about himself, about the state of art, about the possibilities of representation. He realizes that the artist had quite consciously funneled him into that position.

AR: Recently I've heard one particular critic's opinion that an emotionally informed reading tends towards a lack of critique. If you are getting a gut feeling from the work, your visceral reaction is turning off your rational one. (I'm paraphrasing and the critic might not agree with the paraphrase.) Newspaper editors in particular want an emotive response, which spells the death of criticality. Are you at home with autobiographically informed, personal critical writing?

JM: I get that criticism sometimes, that a text is idiosyncratic to a degree where you can no longer agree or disagree. I'm less successful if I open up conversations that are too personal for anyone else to relate it. It's a very fine line but, still, criticality without affect is not an option for me.

MA: I think that there's a line there. Mentioning something that hits you viscerally can be universal, but on the other hand there are almost 8 billion people on the planet and if that work reminds me of my Mom or the dead dog I had, that's not necessarily interesting or helpful. I think in my practice and writing the personal should be left away. But if the thing is a hot day-glo pink that hits you like warmth, that might be personal, but it's also a fact.

AJ: I agree, you can't make a superficial binary out of it. You could argue that some emotions are less conducive to discourse than others, for instance fear is probably the worst, anger is pretty bad, but boredom, which is almost not an affect, is very conducive to conversation. The idea that you can write effectively without emotions seems completely absurd to me. You need to have an emotional engagement with the work. This is also part of aesthetic experience that may or may not be communicable, and it's this «may or may not» that makes you want to communicate it. And if there was really no affectual response, then I don't understand what is being trafficked in the attempt to communicate.

You could argue that you can't justify a position by grounding it solely in your emotions. You go through a phase of extending or elaborating on your response. You can't simply say, «It is like this because I feel this way.» Rather, it's the other way around: I feel this way because I can see the work interrogates or places me or does something to me, positions me somehow. It's the way that the work generates the emotion in you that makes a review interesting.

JM: It can also be the curatorial context – I don't think the emotion has to be generated only by the work itself; you could also love a work and hate the context, so I think there's a dynamic between context and the work.

AR: Brit, you mentioned you came to thinking about a work in its context, but in a non-emotive fashion…

BB: Certain people are allowed to be more emotional than others. That's bullshit, but it's true. As an outsider, as an immigrant, as a person of color, as a woman, I have to take a step back sometimes, take a deep breath, and look at a larger picture and play the long game. The beauty of being able to write is being able to parse out what it is that you want to say. It is a balancing act of ethos and pathos.

AR: Adam, you said before we started that you are a non-combatant in the art market, while Mitchell, you said we're in a world against criticality. Where do you all stand on being critical, being outspokenly for or against? And do you feel that the review format is alive and well, or a dying art?

AJ: I'm very rarely critical in the sense of broadcasting negative judgments about an artist's work. Because that doesn't work. If I think something is bad, I almost invariably don't say anything at all.

BB: What do you mean it doesn't work?

AJ: I think artists suffer a lot to do anything. And the position of exhibiting work is one of exceptional vulnerability and often the work is the product of a long history of thought. Sitting in judgement over it is extremely difficult. Unless the work is somehow deeply compromised in a way that makes addressing the way it is compromised important, I won't

kick it. What would my criteria be? That a work is not beautiful? That it is too beautiful? I genuinely try to avoid snark, because I don't see it as having any use-value for the artist or the work, and rarely for the public.

AR: I wonder if that makes criticism an inherently compromised medium.

MA: If we sub in something else for that: let's say we're criticizing countries who carry out genocide. If I work for Time magazine and say «Why write the article? It will not change a thing.» Which probably is as true for Time magazine as it is for Artforum. We would have a moral problem. Usually when you're seeing something to review, it's in a position to be reviewed. What you're saying is, if it shouldn't be there, I'm putting out my own opinion, saying I don't want this to be replicated elsewhere. So a sense of criticality is extremely important, not to be passive.

AJ: I just can't agree, even on an intuitive level. I don't think that art criticism is equivalent to foreign policy, and even if that were true, I don't see myself with the authority to tell other people what not to like. I don't think it's my job to tell them what to like but to show them something they might otherwise have missed.

JM: Spending my time on trashing a work, so to speak, is not what I do, and would be really hard to place these days, honestly! Being critical about a curatorial context or the way something is presented in a group or thematic exhibition where certain elements or aspects are missing, to point out why something isn't convincing for a certain reason – that's a different level and I think that's not dying, that's doing well. But the good old-fashioned taking apart of an individual solo exhibition on the level of its substance is something I haven't read in a very long time. Also, it's the hardest to write, and I wouldn't feel qualified to do it.

BB: Obviously, being rude or mean or unconstructive is not the point. I have written cutthroat pieces in the past but stand by the criticism, that is it was worth putting in print and perpetuating the conversation. Being critical may have ultimately made me appreciate the work a little bit more. I could immediately dismiss it, but instead I force myself to be critical, in a sense saying that «I don't like this and this is the reason why I feel like it's not engaging me in this way that I would normally like.» Although I've certainly written about work that I thought I really liked, and then by writing about it I ended up hating it. It can happen both ways.

MA: People don't read positive criticism as criticism at all. At the same time it's hard to get anything remotely critical published; you have to hope that the editor is not awake. And that has to do more with the money; all of us are also involved with the art mechanism. This is not separate from it. These things are real and they affect what I do, what all of us do.

JM: I will say one thing, that a negative review can contribute to the valorization of the work as well. All publicity is good publicity. It can help increase the value of the work, and we have to ask ourselves twice if we want to write – given the time and labor we spend, and the need to convince people to publish – just so something ends up gaining value. Then again, regarding the impact of our criticism, if we take all these other factors into the equation, we must be extremely confident that it will, in fact, change people's perspectives, right?

AR: Do you write for a specialized, incestuous audience, or do you try to communicate in a broader language to a broader public? Do we hope to be read by someone who isn't from our milieu, who might be influenced and informed by what we write?

BB: I know I'm coming from a place that's a little different from y'all. Essentially, I'm writing for an outsider artist. I recognize the point of privilege where I am, that I'm able to

write and speak to a certain audience that is growing, people who gain a second-hand experience through reading. I'm trying to give the work some dimension. Images exist in the world so that somebody can experience an exhibition second-hand as well, but my criticism can give weight for and against that. I also think about someone who wants to look back at the conversation that was had five years ago. It's that idea of contributing to the canon at the same time as trying to facilitate conversation for others as well.

MA: I also agree, where I feel a need to mark down in time how I feel about a piece. Of course, all of our opinions can change, so if someone wants to read something they can follow along. If I write something critical, also if I write something ecstatic, I'm writing down that, at this moment, someone felt this way about the work. If in the future this goes out of style, someone can say that back then someone thought there was something good there. And if someone else's trajectory keeps going up erroneously because money is in control of things, at least at one point in time someone said: no, this is not right. Now to get to your actual question, everything I write I want my mother to be able to read and figure it out. It would still be written in a basic prose that anybody who was interested could understand.

JM: Working in education and outreach, in particular, I have few illusions about a broad readership because I work with people who are not interested in art. My day job is bringing Turkish kids from the neighborhood into our institution, and I have no illusion that anybody outside of our circle would buy Artforum. It's not happening. I write a lot for those audiences, but not criticism, that's not what they need. There are other tools, other formats. It's not that I'm saying we shouldn't care; we should, absolutely, but we shouldn't expect them to buy an art magazine, and this conversation is about art magazines, right? So we should be realistic about our audiences.

AR: You're right, we're talking about writing largely for the Fachpresse, but on the other hand mainstream art journalism seems to be so much on the wane. If it dwindles into non-existence, it is hardly going to be positive for art journalism in general.

MA: I have to disagree. Magazines like Flash Art etc. have huge circulations. If we think about our art world as consisting of a few thousand people, they have tens of thousands circulation every month. Doctors and dentists and people who might just go to a fair once a year, or to an exhibition in New York City, they have a real impact on society, and I'm really tired of this idea that we erase these people and think «Oh, it's just some collectors and me writing for no reason.» These are magazines that are on newsstands in Oklahoma. It doesn't even have to sell, it just has to be picked up by one sixteen-year-old kid who looks at this and says, «Oh, is this good art?» This person says no, and explains it to me, saying no it's not. And then you have another writer right now, who says, «Oh this shitty art, which is just made to make money, is good.» Those can change a teenager's ideas. I hate this idea that the art world is just 300 people.

AR: When I was in art school and read those magazines, writing for them seemed like the highest aspiration I could have. These days, it feels like a low aspiration, they feel less relevant than they were.

MA: Because of money. Artforum, for example, the best thing they had in the 80s and 90s was the best and worst of the year. All the critics would choose. If you look at one of these magazines from, say, 1999, some people choose this show as the best and for another it's the worst, and you can judge through different people's criticism what that show was.

AJ: That's true, that section was pretty good.

MA: They got rid of it because advertisers didn't like it. We come back to a money issue. Which isn't a reason to give up, it's just a problem.

AR: How do you resist the money?

MA: Resist the money? You get paid 50 dollars for a review.

AR: Resist the gravitational pull of the people who have the finance. Because they influence things.

MA: They also sometimes have the best artists; it's not easy. The money's not only bad, it can also attract talent.

JM: But bringing it back to the question of readership, I think money comes in here in terms of educational capital, right? Even the kid that picks up the Artforum at Barnes and Noble would have had some sort of education to be there. And I agree with you Mitchell, but there's a spectrum between the incestuous 300 that I didn't mean, and broad readership. Can we reach people who are not interested in what we write about? I have become more realistic since actually working in outreach.

BB: I looked at how many Barnes and Nobles there are in Oklahoma, and there are two. I highly doubt they carry Artforum. But I see your point, Mitchell, because you want to know what's happening in the world and be part of a relationship you might have as a reader of a glossy publication. You believe you're in the know and if you had that access to Mousse, then you'd be part of it. That is the sort of false promise that art magazines sell, trying to keep you abreast of information, but even then, I don't know how many people Mousse commissions per month, or Artforum, but they are limiting the conversation, so much so that nobody can actively participate through magazines any more. If a sixteen-year-old in Oklahoma wants to know what's happening in Brooklyn or New York, I don't think they're going to go to Artforum, they're going to go somewhere far more accessible, on the internet, to someone they can actually relate to.

MA: But which one will they take more seriously?

AJ: Artforum has fact checkers.

MA: The criticism is much more interesting online, but the print matters. We live in a weird time where it hasn't phased in and phased out.

AJ: That's an interesting point. Because there's an extraordinary degree of hyper-critical writing if you look at online formats. The shorter the format, the more critical the writing, if you look at what goes on on Twitter or Instagram, there's a constant, brutal parodying and critique of the art world and the art market. And we all subscribe to this stuff. And there's a total disconnect with that and the canonical writing you get in long-format print magazines.

AR: When I was writing criticism more regularly, I was continually pitching across the Atlantic and telling editors what shows I thought were relevant, interesting and particularly timely and the majority of the time it fell on deaf ears, because it hadn't reached the tipping point for them. Often that same artist was written about a year, two years later. It's not that I was being particularly prescient but that there was a cumulative force. A whole lot of art publishing is people gaining traction, after which they are published and make progress. But that means that you can only publish with the traction, you can never have an individual, critical perspective; it had to echo.

MA: It’s 100%. I’ve stopped pitching to magazines. It happened to me with a certain magazine I write for a lot – a European one – that I would write my pitches every month, and once I said, «I want to write about this show» and I received an email back saying, «No, sorry, the magazine is going in a different direction, will you write about (the same show I’d just pitched).» The idea of art writing has changed in 30 years; they pretend to want to listen, then they farm it back out. The magazine doesn’t want to take any risk, and there’s no trust between them and the writer. And that’s a huge problem, right?

AJ: My experience is that if you write a reasoned explanation for why something which is not on an editor’s radar is maybe worth looking at, they are usually open.

Is the measure of a work that it is somehow relevant to this time?

MA: Not necessarily.

AR: I think it’s a measure. It’s a criterion with which one could argue for a work.

MA: And against.

JM: Isn’t relevance the most specific criteria? I mean relevant to what, and whom, and where, and how?

AJ: The «when» would always be «now,» I guess.

JM: Of course, I wouldn’t type a single thing if I didn’t feel it was relevant.

AJ: Hans Ulrich Obrist often calls work urgent.

MA: He also says never to criticize anything because it might be important later.

AJ: These assertions of urgency sometimes make me feel like I’m reading a transcript from an emergency call center. But it does matter, because it has something to do with the right to exhibit, the way institutional resources are put into things.

AR: The last year has made how we’re connected more visible, even if we’re stuck in one place. Could that be a positive development, that we can now work more locally while still conversing internationally?

MA: I mostly write about things locally. I feel very privileged to get my personal opinions out in the time frame I want, one every five weeks or so, about local things. So I don’t know how much more local you can get.

BB: Basel has a large number of notable institutions to consider, and while I do live here, I certainly would never call myself a local critic. The idea of a cultural hub just reads to me as gentrification, and I would like to write about what might be happening in Lincoln, Nebraska, or Matamoros, Mexico.

AR: Are those «destinations» or everytowns?

BB: I just bring up sites that are not conventional cultural hubs that draw in hordes of art tourists. It is for that reason that I think more interesting things can happen there.

JM: I always feel that if I go to remote places and I find something that is of relevance to the context of the magazine that I would pitch to, then I do it. I want to bring it into that magazine context. At the moment there is hardly anything to see, and in the near future it will definitely

continue to be much harder than before; if museums open then maybe with very limited capacity and special booking procedures, etc. A lot of people will not be able to see things. There's a new urgency! For critics to open up exhibitions that are not on view, even in your home town, for other people to discuss.

AR: It's a good point to close on. Thank you all for taking part in this conversation.

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Mitchell Anderson is an artist and writer based in Zurich where he organizes the project space Plymouth Rock.

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Julia Moritz is a curator, art mediator and critic currently working at Berlin's Gropius Bau and prior to that at Kunsthalle Zürich. Previously, she served as head of the Maybe Education and Public Programs for dOCUMENTA (13).

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