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Magazin für Kunstkritik

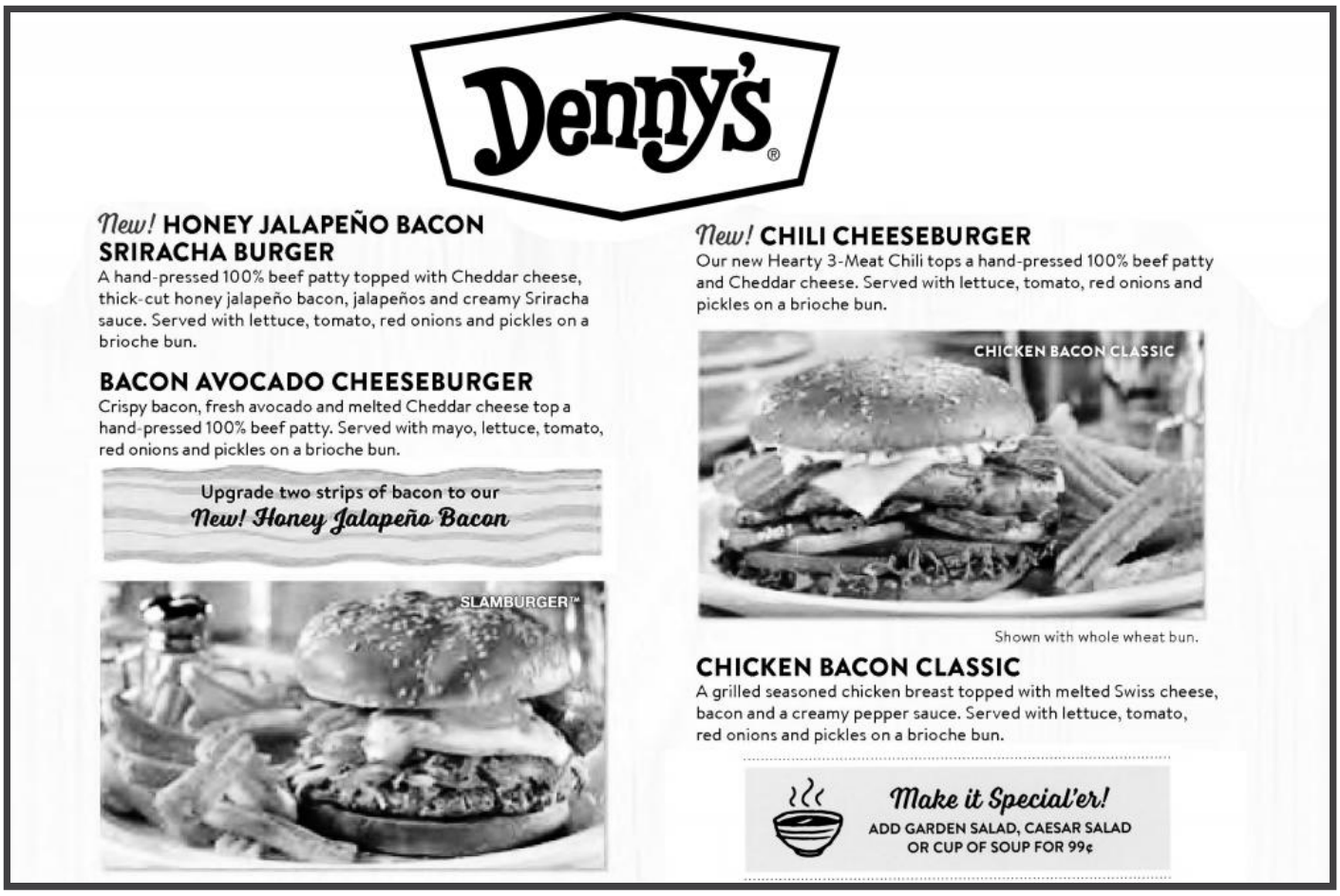
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DENNY'S

Contemporary Art Writing Daily

Criticism serves a multitude of functions within the sphere of art—from being a tool for evaluation, to an active co-producer. Some artists have had uneasy relationships with their critics, while others have embraced critique as an artistic discipline in its own right. Over the course of the summer, PROVENCE reached out to an array of artists and writers, asking what role criticism plays today. The following manuscript queries how the format of the contemporary review can be challenged.



Exhaust, sputtered

«What Happened to Art Criticism?»
«Crisis in Criticism»
«Critical Mess»
«Art Critics Are Critical Of Each Other's Criticism»
«Round Table: The Present Conditions of Art Criticism»
«Invisible Ink: Art Criticism and a Vanishing Public»
«International Art English»
«Perpetual Crisis: Art Criticism and Allegations of Dissolution»
Criticism After Art: Comments on the «Crisis» of Art Criticism (or, How Writing About Art Writing Earns Its Bad Name Again and Again)
«Art without Criticism»

Laurie Fendrich: «These millions of voices, dispersed over the vastness of the Internet, bleating out iterations of «art criticism»

James Elkins: «Art criticism is massively produced, and massively ignored.»

J. Seinfeld ironically, mockingly: «What's the deal with airline food?»Rob Schneider responds: «I know! Could this stuff taste any worse?»

Permanent Professional Smiles

R. Krauss, 2001, October: «Dealers, I think, used to feel that the work of art [...] was given its existence in part by critical discourse. [...] what seems to have replaced it is simply the fact that the artist is having shows regularly at an established gallery and that is enough.»To which Buchloh diagnoses «The judgment of the critic is voided by the curator's organizational access.»[1]

The only recent counterexample I can think of is the New Yorker's blurb about Matthew Day Jacksons' 2013 Hauser + Wirth exhibition. The 110 words were rumored to have caused the artist to layoff most of his studio and leave the city temporarily.[2]

Generally criticism barely burps a market if that artist is doing museum shows, breaking auction records, moving through the channels. Example abound. Claire Fontaine included Chris Wiley's tirade in a Press Packet[3]. Simon Lee did the same for CAWD's on Merlin Carpenter[4]. Buchloh's vivisection of Anne Imhof in Artforum only lead to her being in Bankowsky's Top Ten, which mentioned Buchloh's gutting as value added.[5]

Against such an apparatus one would think criticism would sharpen a bigger sword. But in the wasteland a field struggles to leverage what little authority remains in their mastheads. The critic wanting power must align with where power exists: the visibility apparatus and that social panopticon of art hierarchy: networking. It's a quickly learned rule that while negative reviews may gain interest, positive reviews receive the gallery's megaphone. And writers rolling for the rub. Legitimation for writers moves to within the system they purport to criticise. Art writing becomes further ad fill.

But the thing is, frustrations with art criticism seem to self-exemplify its impotence: that frustration's inability to successfully catalyze change. And criticism's assimilation as art world mechanism deepens its inability to think itself, think outside itself, to create actionable change. Critical thought's ink spills its own terrain, page space, brings itself out to pasture. «Bleating»for mother, some exterior to offer legitimation, to listen.

Surgery

Instead of lament for bigger ears, a better diagnostics may looking at functional criticism. H. Molesworth precipitates a workable definition: «I always thought one of the criteria for great criticism was that it was the kind of thing that artists would read seriously.»George Baker responds: «And the reason for that is that this form of criticism reconfigures the conditions within which one could make art.»

To this end, Martha Rosler makes a distinction in our ornaments: «High-end venues, of course, do not need to pile on the descriptors; they don't have to try so hard. [...] They have established a reputation, and a rich clientele is not swayed by linguistic bling,» She gives evidence of this linguistic indifference (as class symptom) in food menus, comparing the loquacious adjectives of an aspirational (Denny's) class:

> THREE-DIP & CHIPS - Three delicious flavors—mild salsa, queso con carne and warm, creamy spinach artichoke. Served with crispy tortilla chips.
>
> With the $65 item at Manhattan's 4 Seasons:
> Filet of Bison foie gras, perigord black truffles



The writing is austere, almost medical. Things have proper names. The Designer class deals with them: Whitney Biennial Participant, Museum Solo show, an Artforum logo that [substitutes, effigies]whatever words stated. The pedigree speaks for itself. Crispy delicious useless[6].

A distinction bringing us to the most recent functioning of criticism: the Whitney/Kanders fiasco: Decolonize this Place's efforts were unheeded for months, but the surgical focus of one Artforum article's shattering the situation.[7] Again, using Rosler's lens, possible evidence in comparative literature, reading a few of the DtP's protest signs: «Decolonize this Museum» «Warren Kanders Must Go,» «Brought to you by Safariland,» «No Space for Profit from State Violence.» «What's good Whitney?»

Versus the Artforum 65$ headline:
«The Tear Gas Biennial»

Marketers could not be paid to conjure something better. The authors of the Artforum article threw essay weight behind single pointed threat: rebranding their property. The Whitney Biennial, that expensive name. The entire effort after the headlines was service to this brand exchange. The article was a threat - the possibility of memory as a «bad biennial»and ultimately that the «WHITNEY BIENNIAL»name itself might be tainted - their fount of cultural capital, their brand, might be toxic. Things changed overnight.

Branding is just a more systematized form of symbolic capital, a minted form of credibility. Branding unites movements with blessing or scorn. Some of the most effective recent forms of criticism attempt the napalm of a good negative branding. Think «Zombie Formalism,» overnight sapping the wind out of sales; it mercilessly mocked even when not spoken aloud haunting the abstraction. This is the firebomb of art criticism: indiscriminate, cruel. Of course, the fear is that everything becomes reduced to meme.

But Seinfeld recoups staleness of the observation into its own punchline: we've heard it so many times we already know the joke. The audience is let in and moved to a higher vantage, given power to mock the bromide.

[1] Buchloh furthers: «Once the traditional assumption that artistic practices supposedly generate a critical if not a utopian dimension of experience had withered away, we were left with a sense of the primacy of institutional and economic interests.»

[2] «Want to see a very big show of very bad art?»The review having since been removed from the website and difficult but worth finding. Archive.org shows the original review captured on Sep 19th, and taken down by Oct, 21st. Though I think the last line is the real crushing hinge: «You'll want to talk about it.»

[3] «Mealy-mouthed, jargon-besotted forms of this political position's promulgation»

[4] «Has a more vacuous flacid and dead show ever been done?»

[5] «#1 BENJAMIN H. D. BUCHLOH AND ANNE IMHOF (ARTFORUM) Adding to her Golden Lion and Absolut Art Award, Imhof brings home the art world's most coveted honor: a thoroughgoing evisceration by the Marxian eminence»

[6] Gagosian of course does put out press releases, they are however more narrative exposition than grandiose. The real wrinkle in the argument here about adjectival uselessness is in auction catalogs, where pomposity itself is an art form.

[7] Spun wheels would probably be better characterized as a continual headachification. Providing the background pressure to Artforum's eruption. DtP's efforts should not be understated.

CONTEMPORARY ART WRITING DAILY

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doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13930156