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My Jerry Saltz problem

by James Panero

On art criticism in the age of the internet.

Once upon a time in the land of print journalism, the publication of an article was the end of the story. Whether a feature or a review, it was all the same. You signed off on your piece, and your grateful editor sent it to a printing plant. Then it went through a series of mechanical processes, of which you had only the vaguest understanding. A few weeks later, your article returned nicely wrapped up with many other printed words. This colorful paper product was known as a magazine. If you wrote for a newspaper, the procedure was much the same, except your article re-appeared a bit sooner, printed on rougher paper with impermanent ink that rubbed off on your fingers.

In either case, you knew you could sit back, relax, and wait for the phone to ring with congratulations. The article would land in mailboxes and on doorsteps. Readers could rush out to their local newsstands and purchase the publication. Everyone would see it. Your job was done.

Now publishing an article is just the beginning. Print writers who want a readership must devote time to rebroadcasting their content. I will regurgitate the article you are now reading through every electronic conveyance at my disposal. I will email it out to a personal list, tweet it, link to it on Facebook, post it to a blog, Xerox and mail it to a couple of digitally challenged relatives. If I am lucky, I may even discuss it by radio or podcast. I would even fax it, if anyone still used a telefacsimile machine, and happily send it around by pneumatic tube. Comments welcome!

I'm no master of this self-promotion; maybe a few more people will see my article because of it. Yet most of the print writers I know have been much worse at embracing new-media technologies. Not a week goes by when I don't receive an email about a writer's irregularly updated blog of old print content, or a Twitter feed with one post that goes "Hey, I'm new to this thing." Every time, I think, more chum.

It may be no coincidence that the writers and critics who have found success online have rarely been from the print world. The skill-set is quite different. On one side, you have the practitioners of

a lost artisanal craft, like the carvers of scrimshaw or those who ferment small batch raw-milk cheese; the speed of the internet is anathema to their deliberative process. On the other, you have graphomanic-insomniac, egomaniacal headcases with something to prove and nothing to lose. My friends excepted.

Aside from unfamiliarity, there is resentment among the old print crew for new media. The very technologies that print writers must employ to keep themselves in the conversation are the same ones that seem to be putting them out of business. Once writers for high-flight glossy publications could expect a dollar or more a word. Perhaps we dreamed of filing remembrances of literary friends from a cozy cottage in Normandy. Today we are considered fortunate if we get to pull the oars at *The Huffington Post* for some stale breadcrumbs and the pleasure of the lash.

And while print fiddles, criticism burns, at least for those critics who hope to practice their craft in traditional publications for traditional pay. Read about any newspaper or magazine purge, and serious critical writers are always the first to go. It could be they upset the last remaining advertiser, or the publication wants to focus more on lifestyle and gossip reporting, or that Associated Press feeds are simply more economical to reprint. Today, online, everyone is a writer. Words have become a cheap bumper crop of little distinction. That's a problem for the rarefied world of print. And now because of social networking, with its language of "Likes" and "Fans," everyone is also a critic. Therein lies the particular crisis for critics in print.

With varying degrees of success, most writers I know are attempting to use new media in the service of the old. One critic, however, has sought to make new media the message. For a decade, Jerry Saltz filed light but readable, reasonably observant weekly reviews of gallery and museum exhibitions as the Senior Art Critic for *The Village Voice*. Like everyone you ask who reads the critic, "I love Jerry," or at least the Jerry I know from print. For a brief period around August 2009, I was even a "Friend" of his on Facebook, before he purged me with nine hundred other names for providing insufficient postings to his "Wall"—more on that in a moment.

In 2006, this two-time finalist for the Pulizer Prize was tapped to become the Senior Art Critic for *New York* magazine. Here he could have simply carried on his 600-word-a-week trade and left it at that. Instead he decided to turn everything surrounding his print work from a peripheral conversation into the main event, and in so doing became a new-media hit. But is it good for art and criticism?

In short order, Saltz has appeared on a reality television show and gained a large online following—the two new barometers of success in today's media landscape. This past summer, he was a guest judge on the Bravo channel's reality game show "Work of Art: The Next Great Artist." Lacking cable, I only caught a portion of it. Like "Project Runway" and "Top Chef," this contest administered artistic challenges to a pre-screened mix of extroverted individuals, while locking them together in a room and depriving them of sleep, cameras rolling. In one challenge, the artists had to use a "trash heap as their canvas." In another, they were "tasked with creating shocking art

to be judged by acclaimed photographer Andres Serrano!" (Sorry I missed that one.) The winner, Abdi Farah, walked away with $100,000 and the chance to appear in a solo show "at the prestigious Brooklyn Museum"—which sounds like the old saw of winning a two-week vacation in Philadelphia for second prize, and a one-week vacation for first.

The contestants produced piddling work, and the show was a disappointment to many observers, because it was neither all that great nor all that terrible. Rather than elevate an under-appreciated craft such as cooking or garment design to an art form, this one diminished art into another version of design on a deadline. Could that just be the sniping of an insider? Maybe. My barber says no one he knew liked the hair-stylist show "Shear Genius" either. But here the complaint goes deeper.

In "Work of Art," contestants were asked to sew their avant-garde hemlines on demand. Yet they never were able to communicate what makes art unique and powerful, because they couldn't. Art is beauty, energy, and expression contained in a form that emerges on its own schedule and can only be realized through close looking and personal interaction. This is all impossible for the viewer to gather through the medium of television.

Saltz recognized the shortcomings of the show, too. "I failed at practicing criticism on TV. . . . I didn't explain how artists embed thought into material," he wrote in a follow-up essay in *New York* . Yet he also praised the show's unintended consequence: that "over a quarter-million words had been generated" in comments to his online episode recaps. These were not merely afterthoughts, Saltz maintained. Taken together, they represented "an accidental art criticism practiced in a new place, in a new way, on a fairly high level."

> Together we were crumbs and butter of a mysterious madeleine. The delivery mechanism of art criticism seemed to turn itself inside out; instead of one voice speaking to many, there were many voices speaking to one another. Coherently. All these voices became ghosts in criticism's machine. It was a criticism of unfolding process, not dictums and law—a criticism of intimacy that pulsed with a kind of phosphorescent grandeur.

A "mysterious madeleine . . . of phosphorescent grandeur"? Nothing "accidental" about it, these were the results of Saltz's second new-media achievement: becoming a huge online presence.

Over the past two years, Saltz has labored to break through the wall of assignment-based criticism to create an online Midrash, like the medieval commentaries surrounding the Hebrew Scripture. He began by pumping up a heady steam of posts and queries—addressing his latest article or television appearance or deep thought or political burp—with his thousands of Facebook "Friends" through his "Wall."

This dialogue has now spilled over into the comment section of every article he writes. The grandees at *New York* probably wanted a piece of it too, which is why Saltz has started appearing there in more interactive online features. "Criticism contains multitudes," he promised (adapting Whitman's solipsism). His online phenomenon has been the subject of everything from newspaper

profiles (Leon Neyfakh in the *New York Observer*) to art projects (Jennifer Dalton's fifteen-foot-wide *What Are We Not Shutting Up About?*, which charted five months of Saltz's Facebook-page activity and was recently on view at a gallery exhibition called "#TheSocialGraph").

All this production has taken on a life of its own. The rest of us critics can only stop and ogle at the length of his comment threads, which can number in the thousands. More remarkable still is the fact that his wife, Roberta Smith, remains mayor of print-town as the Chief Art Critic for *The New York Times*. With double coverage across multiple platforms, it's a certifiable power play. Yet mixed in among the professional jealousy has also been a lingering sense of dread. Not that Saltz hasn't been good at transitioning his print life to new media. He's been a master at it. Who knows? Maybe he'll win the Pulitzer this time around, and his achievement will lead the way for what appears to be a new direction in art criticism. My Jerry Saltz problem is where that would take us.

Art criticism has its kosher laws of permitted conduct. Every critic has been challenged to apply them to new media. Do you "Friend" an artist you don't know and become a "Fan" of their work? (Yes and no, I decided). Tweet about a friend's gallery opening? (Yes, but mention the relationship in a longer review.) "Like" an artist's work on Facebook? (Sure, but spare your critique until viewed in person.)

Informing all these decisions is the desire for disinterest, the belief in carving out a private space for aesthetic consideration and judgment, and a need for direct interaction. That's why so many critics are aloof in person; it makes it easier to be fair in print. The online mandate to share everything, all the time, narrows this critical space. So does the accumulation of 5,000 Facebook "Friends." (Although I would welcome a few more, assuming we have some prior connection. Otherwise follow me on Twitter.)

One problem is that Saltz's internet presence has degraded his print brand. Of the hundreds of thousands of words produced by his followers to please Saltz's online whim, few came close to the smart ones posed by the artist Judith Braun, the tribal-elder contestant on "Work of Art." On September 16 she wrote on the *New York* website: "So a question I have now Jerry (and this is not a challenge!) is whether you feel this increasingly personal interaction you are having with artists/community is going to compromise your own clarity as a critic."

Saltz has yet to answer this question sufficiently, because he can't. So let me try. On Facebook and now elsewhere online, Saltz regularly mixes portentous metaphysical questions with internet messianism, unctuous flattery of his followers, treacly self-doubt, and gaseous emissions of political cant. The ultimate topic of discussion is not art or even his devoted followers but Jerry Saltz himself.

An over-active online presence often brings out a writer's inner beast. For Saltz, who says he embraces his "demons that demand I dance naked in public," this has meant a rising megalomania,

amplified by a feedback loop of constant faceless online reinforcement. "You cannot believe how the power-elite is hating on the idea that any of you would have anything of intrest [*sic*] to say," has been his regular invocation to his internet ministry. As well as: "You all do know, don't you, that you all created something very unusual, very special, and somewhat astounding in these threads, don't you?" And: "I voted the motherfucking cynical Republicans the fuck out of here."

By giving up the "vertical model" of traditional print criticism, Saltz promises an "art world flatland" where everyone can "see across a new universe." Two years of online use has instead turned him from a reliable writer into the Aleister Crowley of art criticism, where each comment thread portends great visions.

Another problem with Saltz's "accidental criticism" is that he has not leveled the playing field at all. He has instead flipped the traditional critic's role from peripheral character to central actor. His comment writers, many of them wayward artists, are now the critics, while he has become the new art star around which they circulate. Jerry Saltz has become "Jerry Saltz," a socially networked performance piece of art criticism. His online work is not unlike the performance art of Tino Sehgal, who took over the objectless Guggenheim rotunda earlier this year to ask questions like "What is progress?"

The lure of interactive performance art is that it shares the stage equally with the viewer. Marina Abramovic's staring contest at moma became a sensation because it felt like we were the art, just as online comments make us all feel like we are the writers, or through Facebook we have 5,000 "Friends." Following Andy Warhol's dictum that "in the future, everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes," and Joseph Beuys's pronouncement that "everyone is an artist," Saltz has wondered "if all of our interconnectivity and social networking also made everyone a critic." But this fame game can become a pyramid scheme. In exchange for the brief rush of recognition that you might feel sitting across from Abramovic or posting to Saltz's Facebook page, you grant them much more than their fifteen minutes. You end up ultimately diminished—another brick in a 250,000-word wall—while adding to their cumulative luster. You "need to partake of the blood of others to grow," Saltz writes. And he should know.

All this critical leveling has distracted us from what makes art so great. Saltz says his online community could become a new Cedar Tavern. But it never could, because the Tenth Street studios are not just a few blocks away. The vital art of today continues to emerge from studios and ateliers and urban spaces dense with artists, just as it did one hundred years ago in Montparnasse and fifty years ago in downtown Manhattan. The job of a contemporary critic remains to seek out that vitality, tell us where to find it, and explore its strengths.

The material intimacy of direct artistic experience—seeing paint, sensing the artist's hand—does not emerge from social networking. Rather, great art offers a necessary alternative to an over-mediated culture. Art writers should use the internet to counteract the dematerialization of a hyper-connected world, not encourage it through false promises. Criticism is in crisis, but new-media gambits like reality television and social networking, and the illusory communities they

generate, are not the answers in themselves. The point of good art criticism, whether you read it in print or online, should be to turn off the computer, shut off the television, and enjoy art in the flesh.

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