The Critic as a Poet: On the Art Writing of Peter Schjeldahl

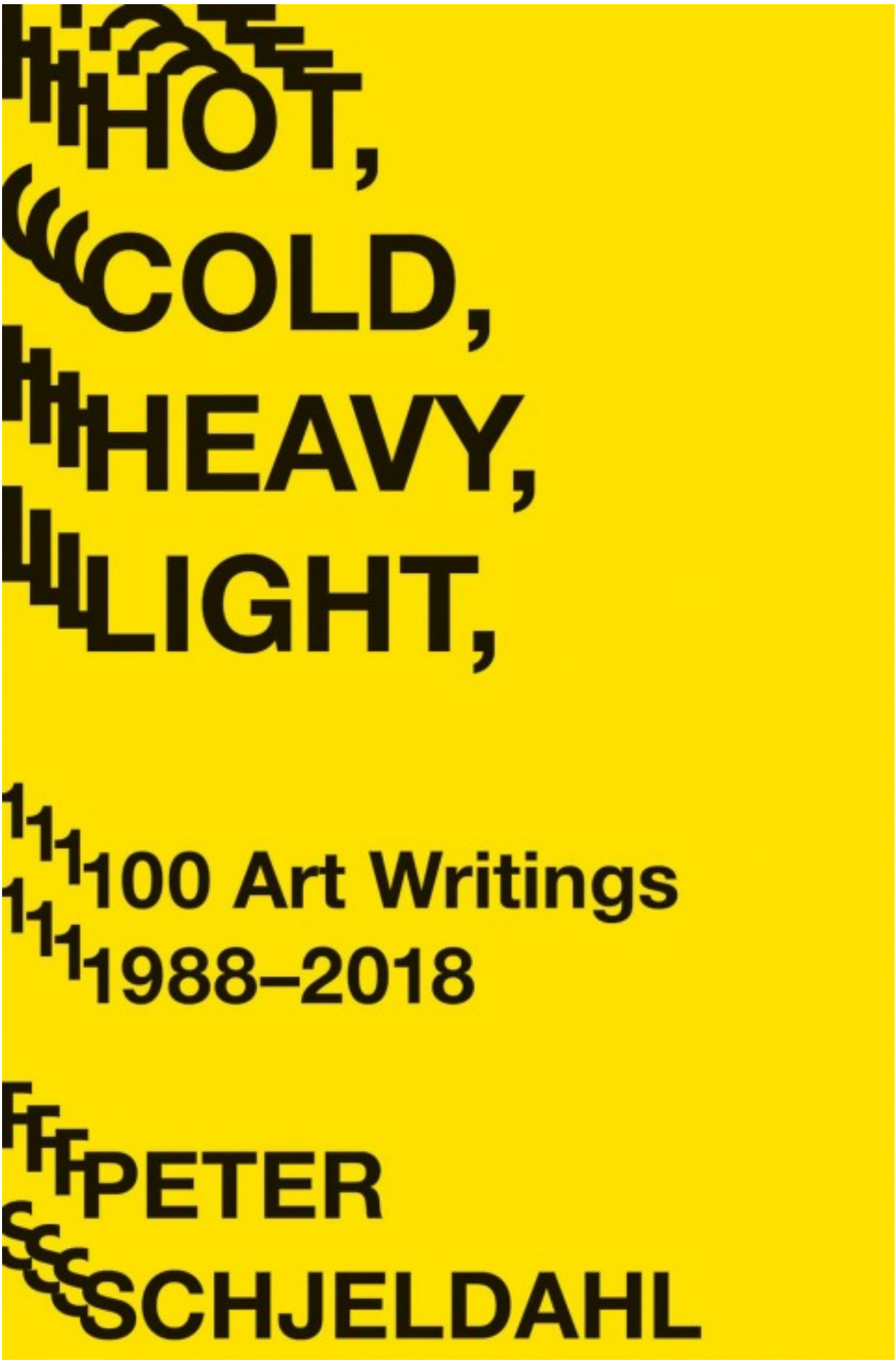
A new essay in a series of reviews of books about art writing by Matt Hanson. This time, we delve into the writings of the *New Yorker*'s senior art critic, Peter Schjeldahl, who "thought of prehistoric cave paintings as contemporary an art as the latest politically-allied video installation in midtown Manhattan."

Essay / Matt Hanson November 11, 2021

The literary journalism of Peter Schjeldahl, the *New Yorker*'s senior art critic, is collected in his most recent book *Hot, Cold, Heavy, Light*". It is subtitled "100 Art Writings," as the 400-some pages therein are not exactly criticisms, but journalistic and literary expositions that outline, with the author's characteristic levity and signature voice, ways to think, feel, and imagine the multivalent art world. Along the way, there are trails of the would-be memoirist, the travel writer, and historian of the contemporary.

His mustache is stained with tobacco and paint. Schjeldahl bears an unmistakable, unpronounceable name whose spelling is about as complex as some of the artwork that he has opined to detail for the better part of the last century, through the idiosyncrasies of his gaze. Following the release of *Hot, Cold, Heavy, Light: 100 Art Writings, 1988-2018*, Schjeldahl is demonstrating that he is very much still at it, two years after sharing with the world that he has fatal lung cancer.

peter.jpg


HOT,
COLD,
HEAVY,
LIGHT,
100 Art Writings
1988–2018
PETER
SCHJELDAHL

[1]Cover of Hot, Cold, Heavy, Light 100 Art Writings, 1988-2018 by Peter Schjeldahl, Abrams Books, 2020

After a past failure to write his autobiography on a Guggenheim memoir grant, Schjeldahl returned to his life story in his confessional piece, "The Art of Dying [2]", which he penned for *The New Yorker* at the end of 2019 with all of the wit and style of his art writing intact. And yet, some two years on, despite the pandemic's ravages, he has remained true to the unstoppable flapping of his mental tongue. With each flap, every word, he carries his readers with him, up to the heights of taste, both in art as in writing. It is an exemplary attribute of the art writing craft that Schjeldahl has become synonymous with its advance into a legitimately professional field.

Edited and introduced by the young New York art writer, Jarrett Earnest [3], *Hot, Cold, Heavy, Light* appears to be the result of an interview from Earnest's book, *What It Means to Write About Art* (2018), a whim of a passing statement said out of fawning admiration, that if he were to produce a new Schjeldahl book, it would express the "driving force" of his love for art, or more exactly, writing about art.

Earnest begins his comprehensive study of Schjeldahl with a1989 review titled "Warhol at MoMA", covering MoMA's "Andy Warhol: A retrospective [4]" for a short-lived sister publication of the *Village Voice* called *7 Days*. In its opening, Schjeldahl declares that he loves Warhol, after turning a spectacular phrase, one that could only have been inked by a poet, setting the scene purple for its "curmudgeonly demurral". And paralleling his life as an aspiring green poet in New York, fresh off the boat of a formative romp in Paris, Schjeldahl speaks of Warhol's indispensability to the experiential myths of America, the exogenous making of its identity, culture and society.

Peter Schjeldahl | Hot, Cold, Heavy, Light **[5]**

Video of Peter Schjeldahl | Hot, Cold, Heavy, Light
פיטר שלדל מדבר על חם, קר, כבד, קל, 3.6.2019

Steve Martin on art - The New Yorker Festival - The New Yorker **[6]**

Video of Steve Martin on art - The New Yorker Festival - The New Yorker
פיטר שלדל בפסטיבל הניו יורקר, 2011

Schjeldahl had a peerless gift of sight, perhaps due to his unrivaled infatuation with painting, the ultimate art of the eye. And it was not merely visual perception that light clarified for him, but lives, histories, nations, ideas, and other twists of fate that he expressed through freshly interpretive, creative language.

In the first piece of *Hot, Cold, Heavy, Light*, Schjeldahl is thinking as a curator who is trying to find

the missing piece of the 1989 MoMA Warhol retrospective. While it is “beautiful,” and “fun,” it is not, according to Schjeldahl, “nostalgic.” So, Schjeldahl the writer steps in, and armed with an overstock of self-knowledge, mines the depths of his life as lived in the midst of Warhol’s political heyday. With his perspicacious, reflexive prose, he finds in modern art history, and particularly Warhol, not only traces of himself, but of America, riven by the reality that most of its cultural production was limited to New York and Los Angeles. The “sad” image of Warhol, as Schjeldahl wrote him, “limping back to New York, and to paint again” defines the saga of American cultural identity as a series of unsung clashes with entertainment industry capitalism.

As presaged in Earnest’s comprehensive *What It Means to Write About Art*, Schjeldahl is recurrently admired in many interviews, but he is not, among the more erudite of his colleagues, a true critic. Reflecting on *The Hydrogen Jukebox*, Schjeldahl’s 1991 book of essays, art historian Darby English told Earnest how Schjeldahl’s “subject-driven language” could effectively displace egotism from art appreciation, instilling a sensibility that might be garnered from the startling, activistic nonfiction of James Baldwin. The art critic Hal Foster, student of Rosalind Krauss, further critiqued Schjeldahl as nothing more than a “commentator” whose writing deserves praise, but, in his words to Earnest in *What It Means to Write About Art* said that his prose is merely “belletristic, concerned with sensibility, suspicious of political positions and allergic to theoretical ones”.1

Peter Schjeldahl. The Critic as Artist, in 2011: Updating Oscar Wilde **[7]**

Video of Peter Schjeldahl. The Critic as Artist, in 2011: Updating Oscar Wilde
USA/Association Critics Art International the for School New The הרצאה של שלדל ב'ניו סקול' עבור
Distinguished

Schjeldahl is expressively self-conscious of his perspective as a white male writer who must fill the shoes of the overexposed national critic. Yet, critiquing the cultural works of oppressed minorities whose ancestors were enslaved and subject to the irreparable traumas of American racism, Schjeldahl has, at times, awkwardly lumbered through the popular criticism that crashed over the sociopolitical establishment in the wake of Black Lives Matter. In the age of social media ubiquity, public observers righteously call him out for using platitudinous terms, particularly in response to art that grapples with the complexes of anti-Black violence.

Yet, in *Hot, Cold, Heavy Light*, Schjeldahl wrote sensitively on the work of Jean-Michel Basquiat in the form of an admiring obituary. The piece was initially published in *7 Days* about a month after the young artist’s passing. A marked indictment of the art world and its complicity in dehumanizing Black street culture, he is just short of naming names for the death of the 27-year old, upper middle class Brooklynite who, as he profiled him in retrospect, “knew a lot about art from his schooling and from museum-going with his cultured mother.”2

However, Schjeldahl defends Basquiat, cast as America’s bad boy graffitist upstart from the downtown New York underground to leading the international art market, against the typecast hype of Warhol fandom, asserting that he was a Black artist in the process of “deepening his identity”. In 2016, he concluded his *New Yorker* review of the highly meta-Black art of Kerry James Marshall by stating in a penultimate sentence that Basquiat was the “greatest of American Neo-Expressionists.”3

Good Artists Tend To Be Bad Students **[8]**

Video of Good Artists Tend To Be Bad Students
הרצאה של שלדל בקולג' לאמנויות יפות בבית הספר לאמנויות חזותיות, 2008

Even if entertainingly, and with literary grab, *Hot, Cold, Heavy, Light* begins by cloying at the all-male, whitewashed feet of canonical artist gods like De Kooning, Pollock, Rembrandt, Courbet, and none more than Velázquez, who he introduces by saying that he was "as good as oil painting as anyone had been at anything".4 The readers may feel, at times, that they are merely hearing the echoes of their own amateur delights, with regard to any momentary, footsore attempt to grasp the nature of unalloyed genius made visible on canvas.

It is in his Velázquez review, of a show in 1989 at the Prado in Madrid, where Schjeldahl reveals his gift for prose, offering sentences that cut at just the right angle, so as to tease out a swiftness of meaning conveyed, and with startling profundity. "Modern art was born when Manet saw Velázguez and despaired,"5 he wrote. Like his close study of de Kooning: he could dissect every brush stroke and network it with leaps and references to patterns along the moving scale of art historical progress, as when he noted how "de Kooning blew open the Cubist grid, changing its mode from structural to fluid".6

As the web of his writings proceeds, hints and spikes of argumentative criticism appear, for example, when he lashed out at Picasso, dramatically defaming his misogynist legacy, which is apparent in the torturous treatment of his models. He is not in the least sympathetic to the masterful skill and dogged tenacity of the infamous womanizer, but concludes his 1994 *Village Voice* review of a show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art by empathizing with Dora Maar, one of Picasso's muses. She was "an intelligent woman who had to witness her own nervous breakdown mirrored in a sequence of vicious Picassos".7

While righteous in his stance, he is perhaps too obvious in his verbal agreement with the Met's curation, which was titled "Picasso and the Weeping Women," Schjeldahl aligns with an order of criticism that refers to biography as inherent to the work of an artist, prioritizing social morality over artistic integrity. In other instances, he is more lenient, as to the flesh-like oils of Weimar painter Otto Dix: "But was he a misogynist? Oh, yeah."8 It's almost like he was relishing in his peculiarly pre-millennial taste for political incorrectness. Instead of adding to the personable tone of his writing, it ages him.

He rationalizes other brushes with misogyny in art history, as in the case of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, where, though the fragile white male is ashamed of his privilege, his images of women are immune. Schjeldahl explains, quickly justifying himself by saying, in parentheses, that women in his life have counseled him: "The feeling is more like the competitive malice that one woman may feel toward another or the harsh criticism that a woman may direct at herself."9

Chadwick_Peter Schjeldahl at SFMOMA.jpeg **[9]**



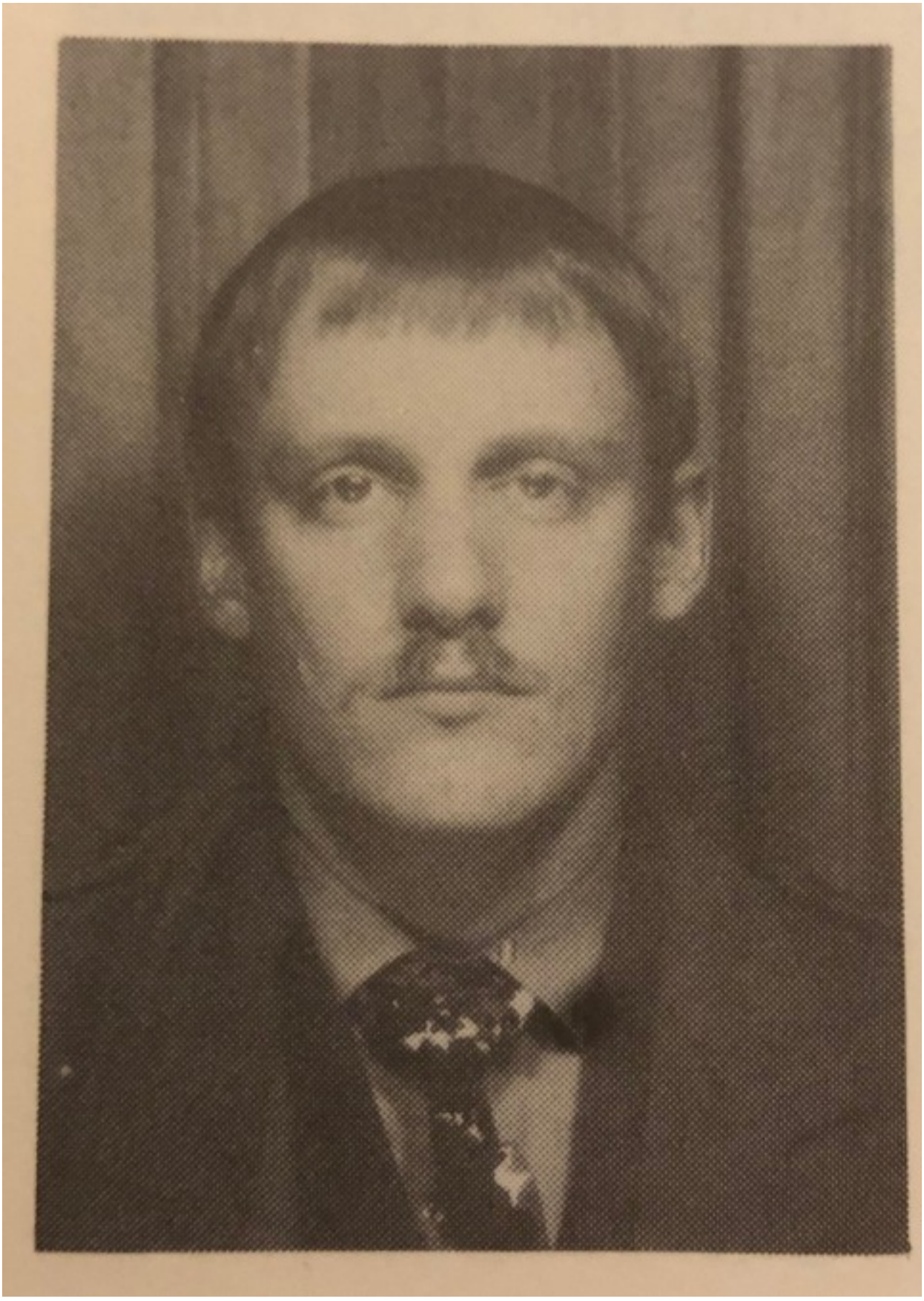
[10]
Peter Schjeldahl at SFMOMA
Photography by Gregg Chadwick, April 8, 2005
Courtesy of Gregg Chadwick [11]

After the initial 100 pages of *Hot, Cold, Heavy, Light*, the “Hot” part might require effort from young

readers in the 2020s, yet, the ensuing waves rollick and flow with special grace. He foregrounds Brazilian artist Hélio Oticica by capturing the transcendence of blissful oblivion, rewiring his American “tin ear” for Latin American art, before identifying a burst of female presence in the 1970s scene when installations were called “environments.”

Schjeldahl had peerless language for such newness as that of the minimalist eccentricities of Ree Morton, clearing a path for the enjoyment of her work, or as Schjeldahl might say, its delectation. Still, in a confession for the *Village Voice* in 1993, the reader may shudder to learn that Schjeldahl, a thin, chain-smoking lecturer, had a "distant crush” on Morton just before her untimely death in 1977.

IMG_8229.jpeg **[12]**



[13]A scan of Peter Schjeldahl portrait, from the book: An Anthology of New York Poet, Random House, 1970

Courtesy of Nick Sturm [14]

Schjeldahl thought of prehistoric cave paintings as contemporary as the latest politically-allied video installation in midtown Manhattan. In 2010, he called the sixteenth-century Florentine painter Bronzino “a new old art star”,10 a turn of phrase that could very well be applied to his unfading status as a perennial art writer. As his prose confronted the maddest geniuses in classical European oils since the dawn of modernism, half a millennium ago, with a peerless grasp of their contemporaneity, it is not inconceivable to imagine that five hundred years on readers will be wolfing down the art writing of Schjeldahl in the same way that we read the poetical criticism of Alexander Pope.

- 1. Jarrett Earnest, *What it Means to Write About Art: Interviews with Art Critics*, New York: David Zwirner Books, 2018, p. 155.
- 2. Peter Schjeldahl, Hot, *Cold, Heavy, Light: 100 Art Writings, 1988-2018*, New York: Abrams Books, 2020, p.39.
- 3. Ibid, p. 78.
- 4. Ibid, p.29.
- 5. Ibid.
- 6. Earnest, ibid, p.13.
- 7. Schjeldahl, ibid, p.50.
- 8. Ibid, p.46.
- 9. Ibid, p.52.
- 10. Ibid, p.68.

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