How to (or not to) Write about Contemporary Art? An Interview with Gilda Williams

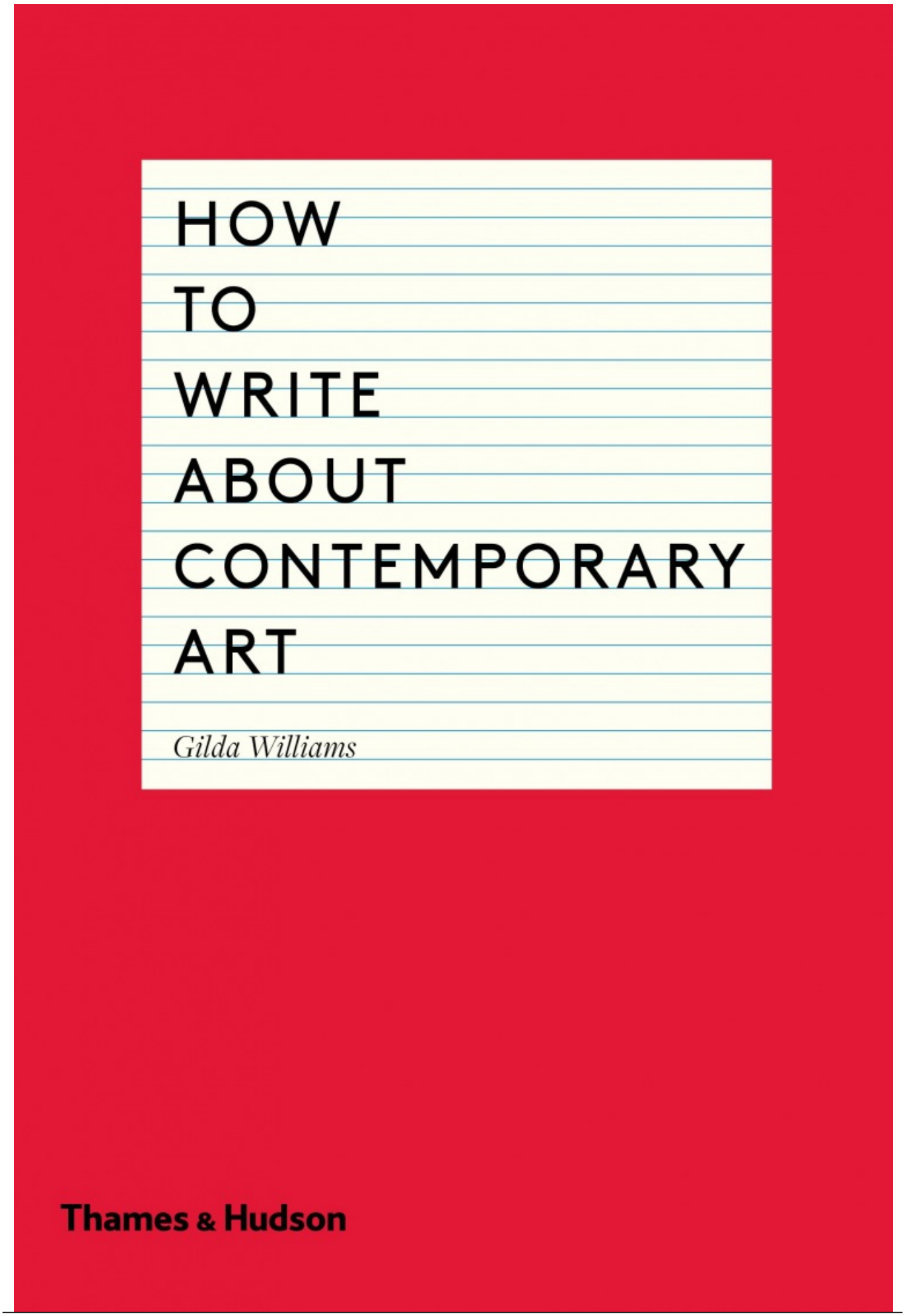
Gilda Williams, author of How to Write about Contemporary Art, talks to Bar Yerushalmi about the problems, dilemmas, and possibilities of writing about art today.

/ Bar Yerushalmi March 17, 2017

We would find it difficult to imagine art today without the multitude of texts surrounding it. Moreover, it seems art critics have become a species of their own, appearing as early as the salon exhibitions of the 18th century. Yet writing about art today seems to be trickier than ever. With discourse so heavily saturated by coded language that has become a smoke screen, one has to labor to discern the art behind.

I met Dr. Gilda Williams, writer and art critic, Art Forum correspondent in London, and author of the 2014 book How to Write about Contemporary Art, for a conversation on the ambiguous nature of art writing today.

How-to-Write-About-Contemporary-Art-9780500291573.jpg


HOW
TO
WRITE
ABOUT
CONTEMPORARY
ART
Gilda Williams
Thames & Hudson

[1]Gilda Williams, 2014. How to Write About Contemporary Art. Thames & Hudson.

Bar Yerushalmi: I must admit, Gilda, before coming to this interview I searched your book desperately for some guidance on 'how to conduct an interview', but could not find anything. Your book is not quite the regular manual its title would suggest. Can you talk about the process that led you to writing this book?

Gilda Williams: How to Write about Contemporary Art is the culmination of all the experiences I've had over many years, learning to write about art. I can remember how hard it was to write my first review — not knowing where to begin and no one to ask.

I was an editor for almost 20 years for Flash Art International [2] and then Phaidon Press [3]. I got to see how very good writers work, and I often coached new promising writers with little experience. I had to devise some general guidance to help them through the daunting task of writing that first major long text. After working in publishing I began teaching contemporary art at MA level, and saw how much student writers struggle with the same common pitfalls. So the book is the culmination of 25 years of trying to answer the questions about art writing that I was asked most. I'd road-tested all the advice in How to Write about Contemporary Art, I really knew what helped.

The book's title is a bit of a joke. There are no rules about how to write about contemporary art. There might be a misconception that How to Write about Contemporary Art explains some standard way of how to write a press release or an artist statement, but I actually wrote it to get people out of that particular cul-de-sac. There is no standard way, and if you are writing with that goal in mind you will never produce worthwhile text.

BY: In your book you introduce the term 'international art English' [4], suggesting there is a homogenous, jargon-led style of writing that is dominating the art world. What is your position facing this kind of writing?

GW: That term came from a well-known article in Triple Canopy from 2012. But there is a historical question here. For centuries, most members of the art world were not expected to write about art. Artists did not write, galleries did not write, curators did not write, collectors did not write. There were two particular casts within the art world who had the task of putting things into words, the art historians and the critics a ventriloquism that artists sometimes resented. We know for example how much Jackson Pollock resented Clement Greenberg for hijacking the meaning of his work. It's only since about the 1950s-60s that artists have insisted on the centrality of their own words alongside the artworks, using interviews and other forms of writing to do the talking for themselves.

Writing well about art is not easy. It takes experience in looking at a lot of art, and maybe also a sort of inclination for words and for writing. I think 'international art English' and jargon are a solution for a lot of people who are not inclined to write, but have to. I find myself teaching a lot of young artists who'd rather be in their studios making art, and who find writing their statement a fairly hateful task actually. I explain how much artists really struggled to get their own voices heard, to speak for themselves, but some students have literally asked me, couldn't you just write it for me? Isn't my artwork my statement?

Having said that, of course so many influential artists write today and, in fact, probably the most important art writers now are artists. Hito Steyerl [5], Frances Stark [6], Liam Gillick [7], John Kelsey [8], Seth Price [9] and so many more. They are more widely read than critics, for sure. So if you are an artist today and are inclined to write -- and might be even very good at it -- then you are in an excellent position. But these artist-writers do not use those shortcuts, like jargon or 'international art language'. They don't need to: they are actually writing, generating ideas and images using

language, not just recombining phrases everybody's already familiar with.

HITO STEYERL "ART AS OCCUPATION" [10] from Fundacja Bęc Zmiana [11] on Vimeo [12].

BY: Do you think artists and art-writers need to first learn that international jargon in order to break out of it?

GW: No, I would not learn the language just to break it. I would read lots of good poetry and fiction. Read anything. The most interesting art writers are poets, novelists, fiction writers. I like the work of Brian Droitcour, who started out writing art exhibition reviews on Yelp [13]. What a brilliant idea: to find an unused available space where to respond to art, and overcome art speak using the language of consumer reviews.

The need to renew art language is constant. It's a historical problem: art changes, language changes. I think one of the solutions, especially for artists, is collaborating with critics and writers. I always love the example of Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett. She was a friend of his and a terrific writer. She could really magic his words into fantastic prose and translate his spoken language accurately onto the page, and they wrote book after book that way. The Andy Warhol Diaries [14] is my go-to example of great art writing. It has absolutely nothing to do with art jargon.

I'd like to see artist-writer collaborations as more recognized, and able writers given credit and proper pay as artist collaborators in the conceptual making of the work, not just extras who turn up late, after the artwork's 'finished'. A sympathetic and capable wordsmith able to work well with artists in verbalizing their art is a very valuable figure.

BY: The art writer is an ambitious character, often underpaid and placed in the bottom of the food chain, yet he or she is facilitating a major part in creating value and hierarchy within the art world. Do you feel this paradox in your work? Can the art writer be considered an underdog?

GW: That's a really good question, because the art world depends on language yet doesn't value it monetarily. The art industry produces as much text as it does art. Yet think how many texts don't even have a name attached: press releases, auction texts, wall labels. There's no such thing as an artwork without a name (or names) attached! But there is so much anonymous writing, and also the assumption that it will be pretty dire. Most art text serves a pedestrian kind of function, and the art world is very accepting of dull, bad writing. We don't think everybody makes art, but we do expect virtually everyone in the art world put into words their experience of art or what they think about it, which is almost as difficult. No wonder so much art writing is so poor. Despite the volume of text the art world requires, critics and art writers have not yet found a way to specialise in producing good texts, and get well paid for it. Really crummy writing and brilliant writing can get paid almost the same.

A good writer should be give value to this work, and the reader should demand better texts. That is another focus in the book -- the desire to raise readers' expectations. You should be able to understand and enjoy art writing.

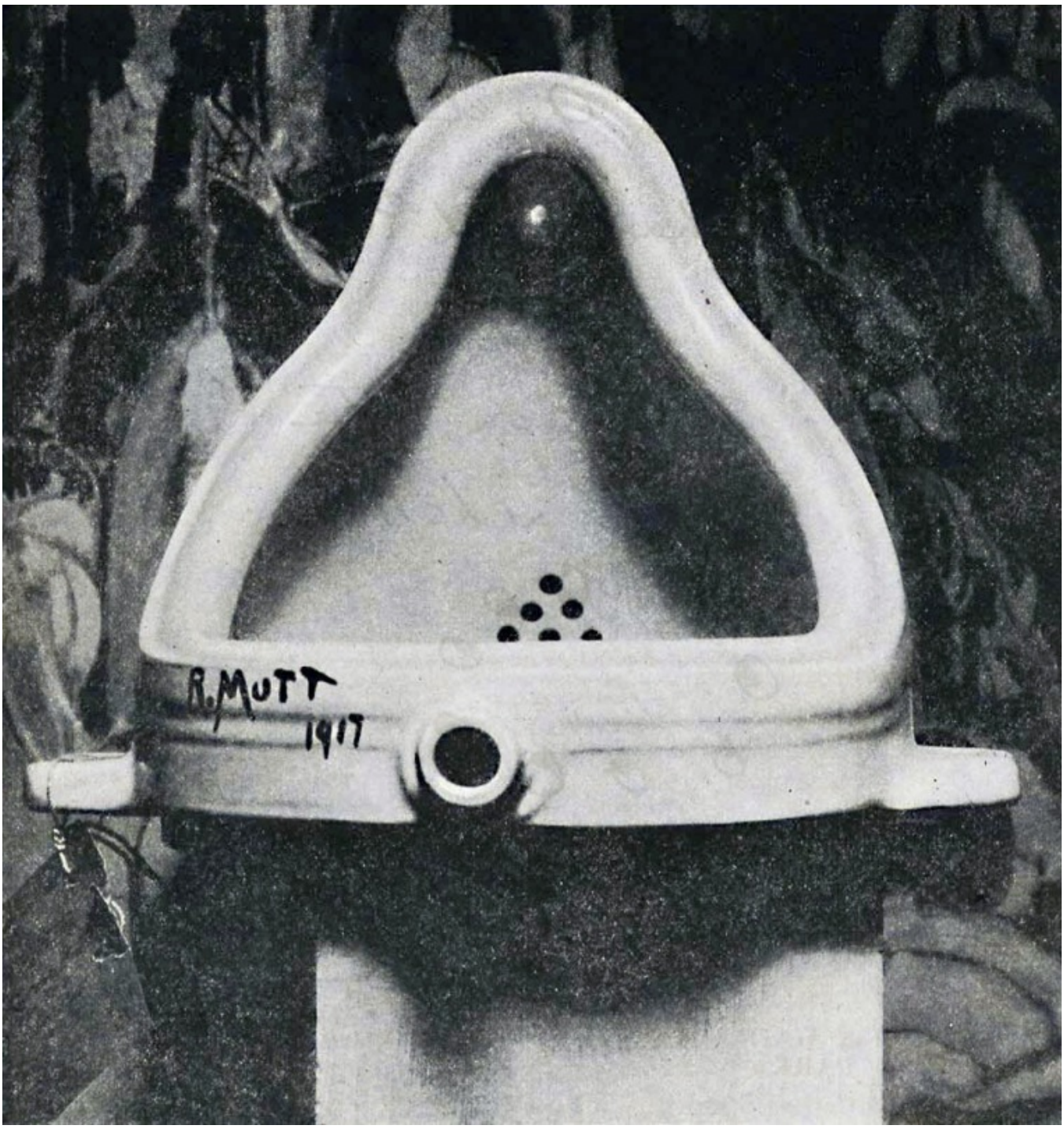
BY: What is the function of these repetitive anonymous texts? Can they be defined as part of the 'black-matter' circulating the art work?

GW: To quote Lawrence Weiner, 'Learn to Read Art'. We assume the text will provide meaning in a way that mere looking cannot. The most difficult thing is to make someone really look at art. In fact I

have found that it is almost impossible. Students will spend hours and hours reading philosophy or cultural theory to ‘explain’ an artwork, but won’t spend a single long hard minute just looking at it. It’s true. Art text is basically a shortcut into meaning, to avoid having to look carefully. This is because most people have no training in reading visual information, but we can all read words – we’ve been training since kindergarten.

Generally we might blame it all on Duchamp – so let's blame it all on Duchamp. When you looked at *Fountain* you needed to be told a special piece of information to understand it: it is a readymade, a radical gesture. You could not just look at it in terms of beauty, craft or tradition, so suddenly all the terms and criteria that had been utilised until then turned useless. The artwork became language-dependent. This also created a kind of a rite of initiation -- learning the magic words that make the art meaningful. But *Fountain* is now a century old. We should be able to think about art and its relationship with text in ways that have moved forward since *Fountain*, but most short art texts basically want to give you that same magic insight that you could not detect on your own in order to understand the work.

Marcel Duchamp, Fountain, 1917, Photograph by Alfred Stieglitz..jpg
[15]



[16]Marcel Duchamp, Fountain, 1917
Photograph by Alfred Stieglitz

Language can become a kind of hubris around the work, limiting the ideas talked about in association to art. I often do this exercise with new students: Can you talk about Duchamp's *Fountain* without mentioning the word 'readymade' even once? Can you talk about Cindy Sherman's Untitled series [17] without talking about the gaze, or the cinematographic, or objectification? The students not only have problems with the writing itself, but struggle with the notion that they might invent their own framework through which to think about the work. And of course there are an infinite number of potential frameworks.

BY: Looking at the history of art criticism, from Baudelaire's criticism of his fellow artists to today's Barry Schwabsky and Tim Griffin, we witness the constant metamorphosis of the discipline. From the archaic role we may call 'the angel of judgment,' who is there to determine the fate of an artwork, to a more admiring observer, who looks at the work and 'contextualises' it, attempting to ascribe it with a place within the world. How do you position yourself within this archetypical spectrum?

GW: There is an image I love; it is the opening of the first Salon d'Automne in Paris in 1903. The critics have just arrived, and they look like they are there for a feeding frenzy, like they are going to attack the paintings. They are all holding pointy umbrellas, which look like bayonets – they look like they are going to just rip the artworks to shreds. There are no artists, just the handlers, bringing the paintings in like lambs to slaughter. That picture of the critic, a hubristic figure who gets to pass judgment unilaterally, is of course a terrible model of engagement. The artists do all the work, take all the risks, but are unable to speak for themselves. But critics don't work like that anymore, thankfully. There are many more voices, and the opinion of influential dealers and curators matter much more.

Curators and dealers don't not just offer critical commentary 'after the fact', but – in the best instances -- take big risks supporting artists they believe in. The critic, on the other hand, at worst just passively responds to artworks and exhibitions that someone else had staged, articulated and made choices around. If all critics can offer at best is lovely prose, no wonder their work barely holds real value.

jury of the salon de Paris 1903.jpg **[18]**



[19]The opening of the first Salon d’Automne in Paris, 1903

BY: More writers today are interested in creative writing about art. Writing not just an act of evaluation and examination but actually taking an active part in the creation process of the artwork they are writing about. What do you think about the emergence of this type of creative/poet writer?

GW: The impression I have is that some very talented young writers are preferring to go to art schools over attending creative writing programs. Art schools are very good places to think creatively and to get exciting feedback. It is like what happened to the film industry in the 90s when very gifted filmmakers -- Steve McQueen being the most stellar example -- went to art schools rather than film schools.

Looking historically, the whole notion of de-skilling in art was applied to writing as well. The use of machines like a tape-recorder once seemed like a way to deskill and demythologise the act of generating text and creating art language. Of course the Internet has opened a universe of unskilled, non-specialist commentators on art – and everything else, for that matter.

It’s fantastic to read really able writers like Olivia Laing, Brian Dillon, and Martin Herbert. In their writing they insert their own creative work and lived experiences alongside that of artists and artworks, and this feels very new. I think now is a great time for art writing, and even for the bottom feeders in the art writing pond. All those press releases everyone complains about; I actually think they've gotten better. Most private galleries and institutions now have what I call ‘the resident scribe’, someone who does the writing. Those figures are not necessarily art critics, in fact they are not art critics at all, since they are completely in support of their institution. They are art workers who specialise in the written word – there isn’t really a name for them yet.

BY: There is a growing online presence to art writing. How do you see these changes influencing the role of the critic/writer about art?

GW: The Internet had done wonders for art writing. Art writing is much more relaxed, people discuss art in the first person without assuming some weird art voice. Of course there is a lot of inane writing out there too, but you need to consider the fact that opening up the art world is what generated art criticism in the first place, in the 18th century. The earliest art critics were self-appointed judges who replaced king and clergy, with often very partisan opinions on certain artists they favoured.

baud_carjat_1863.jpg **[20]**



[21]Charles Baudelaire, 1855

Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris

Up until ten years ago, in order to get published you had to pass through a very tight net of editors and copyeditors. Texts used to get changed quite badly and it wasn't really what you wanted to say in the end. I’m so glad that’s gone –- and editors seemed to have become more sensitive too. My advice for editors is: only change a text if you absolutely, 100% must, like the grammar is wonky or the facts are mixed up. Otherwise, leave good writers alone — please don’t just replace the writer’s idiosyncrasies with your own.

One thing I haven't talked about is journalism, which is not criticism but professional reporting, usually about things like the personalities or the glamour or the market, art topics with broad appeal. There is very skillful art journalism out there, not always by insiders but often well-researched and fabulously well-written, and this is thriving alongside new types of criticism. I support it all, as long it’s not lazy writing and has something to say.

BY: Any last advice, Gilda?

GW: I think young writers become good when at a certain point in their life they really want to share their ideas and communicate. At some point, a young curator or artist really gets an idea they want to share – truly, in their heart of hearts, they want people to understand their idea. They’re not just filling in some assignment or application. That’s when an art writer really gets going. You can read *How to Write about Contemporary Art* from beginning to end, but if you have nothing you want to say, it can’t really fix your art writing.

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