The End of Art Criticism?
Art Writing in the Age of the Internet

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Abstract

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The title of this thesis is a play on Arthur Danto's 1984 essay title *The End of Art.* Danto states that in the postmodern condition where ordinary objects such as soup cans and Brillo boxes can be considered art, the traditional model of the Western Canon and its progression of styles has become obsolete. Similarly, writing art criticism was traditionally the province of specialized publications, arts sections in newspapers, and professional art critics. In the age of the Internet, however, anyone with access to a personal computer can write and post their own "art criticism" on the World Wide Web.

Through an analysis of the history of the genre and of hypertext and its parallels with several literary theories, I will examine three art writing websites. These case studies will provide an overview of the diversity of the art writing that is available on the Internet, with a view to establishing the current state of art critical writing that can be found on the World Wide Web.

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But, surely, criticism is itself an art. And just as artistic creation implies the working of the critical faculty, and, indeed, without it cannot be said to exist at all, so criticism is really creative in the highest sense of the word. Criticism is, in fact, both creative and independent.[1]

INTRODUCTION

Oscar Wilde wrote this comment in an essay of 1890 in a response to Matthew

Arnold's tract *The Function of the Critic at the Present Time*, which had appeared

twenty-five years earlier. Arnold contended that the function of a critic was to

objectively describe and discuss the art object in accordance with established standards of

value and taste; the creative act was the realm of the artist. Wilde, on the other hand,

believed that the critic ranked above the artist because he had to create a meta-text in

order to discuss the creative works of others. One wonders what Wilde would have to

say about art critical writing in the age of the Internet. Once the specialized arena of art

journals and newspaper arts columns, in today's age anyone with access to a computer

can enter thousands of web sites and art blogs to obtain information, reviews, or images

that are constructed by those with a range of knowledge from the highest to the lowest.

Such "democratization" is seen by many as breaking down barriers between professional

art writers and the art-going masses who also wish to have their say.

The fact that the World Wide Web gives voice to anyone who wants to post their ideas

on art is not here considered to be a negative thing. However, we can question the larger

consequences the Internet has on the genre of art critical writing itself. Historically,

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[1] Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," in *Collected Works of Oscar Wilde*, (London: Wordsworth Editions, 1997), 838.

modern art criticism was acknowledged as playing an essential role within the art milieu. Is art criticism still indispensable as a part of the production of the art world, as Wilde would contend, or has access to a free-wheeling forum through the technology-based medium of the Internet provided us with a "watered-down" version of the discipline, where any opinion is taken as critical judgment? Has the advent of hypertext and the World Wide Web diminished the authority of modern art criticism?

In this thesis, I will investigate the ramifications of the World Wide Web on art criticism and writing by analyzing three websites. In order to provide historical background to this examination, Chapter One will present aspects of the history of modern art criticism. Establishing this framework will provide a basis of comparison to the discussion of art writing on the World Wide Web in Chapter Four. Due to the enormity of the subject, I have chosen to discuss the contributions of a select number of critics who provide a vital framework towards understanding the path of modern art criticism. Those writers are the Enlightenment's Denis Diderot, the nineteenth-century poet and critic Charles Baudelaire, twentieth-century art critic Clement Greenberg, and philosopher and art theorist Arthur Danto, who is still active today.

In order to discuss the effects of the World Wide Web on art writing, it is key to provide an outline of how this information delivery system came to exist. I will outline this in Chapter Two, as well as bring to the fore some of the intentions of those who envisioned this kind of information-sharing/communication system in various prototypes, which had their origins in the sixteenth-century. I will also include a brief discussion of the some of the pitfalls of the "unmanaged" World Wide Web. In addition, I will

consider some of the parallels between various literary theories and the World Wide Web. These include Gérard Genette's theory of *transtextuality*, specifically the idea of the *paratext*, Jacques Derrida's notion of *débordement*, and Roland Barthe's concept of the death of the author.

Chapter Three will serve to provide a background to the three case studies I have chosen. In addition I will examine the thoughts and concerns of several established art writers regarding art critical writing on the World Wide Web.

In the final chapter I will examine three divergent art-writing-based websites, with particular emphasis on blogs. What *are* the texts posted on these sites? Are they criticism? Opinion? Promotion? Who is writing and for what audience? What are the frameworks that surround these texts? What type of language do these websites and blogs use? And what is the current relationship state of art critical writing on the Internet in relation to the framework of modern art criticism as structured by Diderot, Baudelaire, Greenberg, and Danto?

Art Criticism, I would say, is about the most ungrateful form of 'elevated' writing I know of. It may also be one of the most challenging-if only because so few people have done it well enough to be remembered-but I'm not sure the challenge is worth it. Clement Greenberg.[1]

CHAPTER ONE
Diderot, Baudelaire, Greenberg, and Danto.

The earliest texts that suggest a definition of what we can consider to be art criticism in terms of discerning art's value and meaning can be found among the writings of Plato.[2] The philosopher's concept of "mimesis" stressed that it was impossible for painting to accurately represent the world around us. Painting was copying and as such was twice removed from reality: once by the artists' subjectivity and secondly by the painting itself as an object. Furthermore, the making of images or representations dealt with the superficial aspect of things, rather than addressing and understanding their real nature. Art also did not aid in the building of character, for imitation was not the correct path to the truth. For these reasons, Plato placed painting well down the ladder of what he deemed were worthwhile intellectual pursuits. Nevertheless, the Platonic "path to truth" eventually led to, in its various forms, the essential character of what we call art criticism.

Art criticism has been seen (and is still seen by some) as a *response* to art. The writings of Denis Diderot, beginning in the mid-eighteenth century in the *Correspondance littéraire*, are generally cited as the beginning of modern art criticism. In 1759 he wrote critical reviews of the Louvre's exhibition, called *Salon*, of paintings and

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[1] John O'Brian, ed. *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), vol. 1, 256.
[2] For further reading see the tenth book of Plato's *Republic*.

sculptures by members of the Royal Academy. There were never more than fifteen subscribers at a time to this cultural missive; most were crowned heads living far from Paris and eager for news of the city's aesthetic activity; there were no subscribers in France. However, art critiques of the famed *Salons* also occurred in less elite media through such forms such as vaudeville, verse, caricature, schematic diagrams, feuilletons, essays, and pamphlets, and these were often by unidentified writers. In the two and a half centuries that followed, art critical writing grew to encompass such diverse content and media as exhibition reviews, museum guides, monographs, historical studies, dictionary entries, travel accounts, biography, and personal correspondence. It would also take on a new identity with the invention and development of the computer and the Internet.

While modern art criticism employs elements of art history, art theory, and aesthetics, what separates it from other arenas is the pursuit of valuation. The subjectivity of the critic perpetuates ideas of intention and taste, often his or her own, to a wider audience whether through the traditional print medium or the World Wide Web. Critics can situate their own expertise and therefore their own importance within the genre of art writing and art criticism. The definition of contemporary art criticism has loose parameters. Some writings are merely descriptive; others address feminist, social, historical, or political concerns. The entrenched notion of a unilateral dialogue between the art critic and the art object was largely replaced by a revisionist art criticism that was inspired by the works of T.J. Clark and Nicos Hadjinicolaou from the late 1970's and early 1980's. Among their hypotheses was the notion that the language used by art critics overlapped onto prevailing social and cultural discourse in order to perpetuate prevailing

notions in the regulated categories of class and gender, for example. In the 1980's

Marxist and feminist ideologists took up this thread, investigating the role art played in

social and political arenas. In revisionist thought, language is fixed and can be used

interchangeably within a multiplicity of discursive realms. This type of approach,

however, can reduce art criticism to a secondary position within surrounding cultural,

social, and political discourses.

More recent academic approaches define art criticism as a "historically determined

social and linguistic practice, organized according to a complex of changing social and

material conditions-linguistic rules, literary codes, gendered cultural, political and

institutional formations-that in different ways mediate the content, the form, and the very

objects of critical debate."[3] Art criticism, in conjunction with historical studies and the

surrounding practices of cultural institutions is an integral part of the total production of

art. Therefore, the practice of art criticism is recognized for its development in a

multiplicity of historical and contemporary contexts as well as the genre's inherent

heterogeneous nature.

Seen in this way, art criticism provides a richly layered discourse as it goes beyond

merely art or simply a designated place within which one talks about art. Art criticism

and art writing can serve as sites of investigation into a broad spectrum of

contemporaneous discourses. It is important to bear in mind that there is not now, nor

has there ever been, one apparent or correct art-critical language. The following is a brief

examination of a small selection of past and present art critics that will help to introduce

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[3] Michael Orwicz, "Art Criticism," in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, (New York: Oxford University Press), 1998, 462-466.

the multiple approaches to art criticism. This discussion begins with the person considered to be the father of modern art criticism, Denis Diderot (1713-1784). Beginning in the 1740's, the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture organized the *Salon*, a free biannual public art exhibition held at the Louvre. The importance of this juried presentation cannot be underestimated, for acceptance in the Salon most often (but not always) guaranteed recognition and sales for the artist. Further prestige was conferred if one was awarded a medal for one's painting, sculpture, or printmaking. The publicity, to use a modern word, that might arise from this recognition, was filtered through the print media. Salon reviews were published in newspapers and art journals, but could also be found in such audience-diverse publications as those dedicated to dentistry, hunting, and phrenology. Thus the arena for modern art critical writing at its inception was heterogeneous in nature and has its parallels in our own age.

In the eighteenth century and for a large part of the nineteenth century, the designation of "art critic" referred to a mostly male, bourgeoise constituency of politicians, functionaries, businessmen, writers of all genres, and occasionally artists. Most often, though, "art critics" were journalists who provided newspapers with articles on any number of subjects. Art historian Anita Brookner notes that the genre of eighteenth century art criticism was "a career open to all the talents, the field in which the man of letters could not only reveal the extent of his own dilettantism, but could say something untoward, let slip some information about himself, his knowledge of, and feeling for, the artist, some cardinal fact about the slow climb towards interpretation which is the true

subject of all criticism."[4] Obvious parallels can be seen today in the numerous sites on the World Wide Web.

Diderot (fig. 1) was one of the French Enlightenment's *Philosophes*, along with Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Voltaire and renowned for the enormous intellectual undertaking that was the multi-volume *Encyclopédie*. The project intended to provide information to the people of France with "an enlightened version of all existing knowledge, cunningly cross-referenced to provide the initiated with even more enlightenment."[5] This description ironically suggests some of the major presumptions of the World Wide Web. Diderot's art critical style transposed his belief in the classical unities from drama (action, time, and place) onto painting and sculpture and he judged these arts in accordance with those values. In his art writing he used both science (how the picture was constructed, what was it theme, was is structured logically), and morality (virtuous subject matter and a salubrious and educating effect on the public sphere). It was Diderot in fact who elaborated on the concept of the "grande idée," wherein a painter must consider the picture's content on a moral level and not merely on a formal or emotional one. One example of this is found in Diderot's review of a painting by Jean-Baptiste Greuze (1725-1805) in the 1763 Salon. *Filial Piety: The Benefits of a Good Education* (1763) (fig. 2), depicts an elderly man, paralyzed and upon his deathbed; he is surrounded by a caring and loving family. This instructional tableau on family morals fit with Diderot's critical

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[4] Anita Brookner. *The Genius of the Future: Diderot, Stendhal, Baudelaire, Zola, the Brothers Goncourt, Huysmans*. London and New York: Phaidon Press, 1971, 1.
[5] Brookner, 7. Diderot's *Encyclopédie* was inspired by a translation of English encyclopaedist Ephraim chambers' *Cyclopaedia*, first published in 1728.

ideal that art should be socially useful. In his review he lauds the painter and his subject

matter:

> D'abord le genre me plait; c'est la peinture morale. Quoi donc! Le pinceau
> n'a-t-il pas été assez et trop longtemps consacré à la débauche et au vice? Ne
> devons-nous pas être satisfait de la voir concourir enfin avec la poésie
> dramatique à nous toucher, à nous instruire, à nous corriger et à nous inviter à
> la vertu? Courage, mon ami Greuze, fait de la morale en peinture, et fais-en
> toujours comme cela! Lorsque tu seras au moment de quitter la vie, il n'y aura
> aucune de tes compositions que tu ne puisses te rappeler avec plaisir. (First, I
> like the genre: moral painting. And how! Has the paintbrush not been dedicated
> to vice and debauchery long enough? Should we not be satisfied to see it
> at last compete with dramatic poetry in touching, educating, reforming us and
> leading us to virtue? Take heart, Greuze my friend; preach morality in painting and
> never give up!) [6]

Diderot critiqued the formal qualities of a painting with equal verve. In his Salon reviews

of 1765, Diderot says of a work titled *Refreshments* by Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin

(1699-1779): "The biscuits are yellow, the jar is green, the handkerchief white, the wine

red, and the juxtaposition of this yellow, this green, this white, this red, refreshes the eyes

with a harmony that couldn't be bettered; and don't think this harmony is the result of a

weak, bland, over-finished style; not at all, the handling throughout is of the greatest

vigor."[7]

Before Diderot began to write art criticism in response to the new exhibition venue of

the Salon, art writing consisted mostly of lists of paintings in exhibitions, biography, or

technical manuals. Exuberant by nature and gifted with rhetoric, Diderot created free

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[6] Denis Diderot, *Salons, Volume I: 1759/1761/1763*. Texte établi et présenté par Jean
Seznec et Jean Adhémar (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 233.
[7] Diderot, *Diderot on Art, Volume I: The Salon of 1765*. Translated by John Goodman
(New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1995), 233.

form reviews – he would choose an aspect of a work and launch his critical investigation from there. He would sometimes "repaint" or "resculpt" a work in his critical review if he found the original wanting in expression or execution; sometimes he would give paintings new titles that he thought were truer representations of the content of the picture. Occasionally, he would weave a narrative of his own invention that he felt better explained the intention behind a painting's content. Nevertheless, Diderot created a new template for art writing: a freer, more poetic approach, which was later exemplified by the nineteenth-century writer Charles Baudelaire, and one that can still be found in some contemporary art writing on the Internet.

Charles-Pierre Baudelaire (1821-1867) (fig. 3) is primarily identified as a poet. Indeed, his controversial collection, *Les Fleurs de Mal* published in 1857, is considered by many to be the most important book of poetry published in the nineteenth century (though at the time, the public outrage at the dark subject matter of the poems caused the book to fail). However, Baudelaire first established himself in Parisian cultural life as an art critic, having read extensively on a large variety of subjects that included contemporary art criticism as well as that of the past. By 1845 approximately one half of Diderot's writings were available and Baudelaire devoured them.

Baudelaire's first published work was his booklet-form review of the Salon of 1845. One hears echoes of Diderot in this review, for example, in the curt and sarcastic tone in which he dispatches a painting he does not like: "This year M. Decamps has contrived for use a surprise which surpasses all those on which he worked for so long and with so much love in the past... This year M. Decamps has given us a bit of Raphael and

Poussin. Yes, by heaven, he has! Let us hasten to correct any exaggeration in that sentence by saying that never was imitation better concealed, nor more skilful...."[8] Compare that review with Diderot's assessment of portraiture by Francois-Hubert Drouais (1727-1775): "If you are curious about faces made of plaster, you must see Drouais' paintings."[9]

One also hears echoes of Diderot in Baudelaire's opining on a general lack of invention and spiritedness in the paintings exhibited at the Salon of 1845: "...several very fine (paintings) by Delacroix and Decamps. For the rest, let us record that everyone is painting better and better - which seems to us a lamentable thing; but of invention, ideas or temperament there is no more than before. No one is cocking his ear to tomorrow's wind; and yet the *heroism* of modern life surrounds and presses upon us... There is no lack of subjects, nor of colours, to make epics."[10] Of the 1759 Salon Diderot writes: "We have many artists; a few goods; not one excellent; they choose beautiful subjects; but they lack force; they have neither spirit, neither heat, nor imagination. Almost all sin by their use of colour. There is much design but no ideas."[11]

Baudelaire was searching for an artist who could, through paint, brush, and canvas, explicate modernity. He believed passionately that the modern in art should reflect the flux of contemporary lived experience – modernity. Baudelaire's notion of modernity was inextricably bound with his notion of beauty: "Beauty is made up of an

[8] Baudelaire, *Art in Paris 1845-1862: Salons and Other Exhibitions*. Translated by Jonathan Mayne. (London: Phaidon press, 1965), 9.
[9] Diderot, *Salons, Volume I: 1759/1761/1763*, 67.
[10] Baudelaire, 31-32.
[11] Diderot, 69.

eternal, invariable element, whose quantity is excessively hard to determine, and of a relative, circumstantial element, which will be, if you like, whether severally or all at once, the age, its fashions, its morals, its emotions..."[12] To Baudelaire, "Modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immovable."[13]

Furthermore, for Baudelaire, the painter of modern life was exemplified by the artist as flâneur;[14] a man who wanders in amongst the crowds collecting impressions and perceptions of daily modern life and beauty and then executes them in his art. The Dutch-born illustrator Constantin Guy's (1802-1892) sketches and watercolours of people in the Bois du Boulogne or attired in their finery strolling about the city seemed to personify the critic's requirements (fig. 4). Baudelaire's well-known essay *The Painter of Modern Life* is based on Guys, though the artist, a retiring man by nature, pleaded with Baudelaire not to use his full name in the essay, only his initials. Of his work Baudelaire states the following: "Mr. G retains a remarkable excellence which is all his own; he has deliberately fulfilled a function which other artists have scorned and which it needed above all a man of the world to fulfill. He has everywhere sought after the fugitive, fleeting beauty of present-day life, that distinguishing character of that quality which, with the reader's kind permission, we have called 'modernity.' "[15]

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[12] Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*. Translated by Jonathan Mayne. (London: Phaidon Press, 1975), 3.
[13] Baudelaire, 403.
[14] *Flâneur* is derived from the French verb *flâner*, which means to stroll or, pejoratively, to idle or loaf.
[15] Baudelaire, 40.

Baudelaire also thought of art critical writing as a kind of poetry:

> I sincerely believe that the best criticism is that which is both amusing and poetic; not a cold mathematical criticism which, on the pretext of explaining everything, has neither love nor hate, and voluntarily strips itself of every shred of temperament. But, seeing that a fine picture is nature reflected by an artist, the criticism which I approve will be that picture reflected by an intelligent and sensitive mind. Thus the best account of a picture may be a sonnet or an elegy.[16]

Of his own art criticism Baudelaire wrote:

> you will often find me appraising a picture exclusively for the sum of ideas or of dreams that it suggests to me. Painting is an evocation, a magical operation (if only we could consult the hearts of children on the subject!), and when the evoked character, when the reanimated idea has stood forth and looked us in the face, we have no right – at least it would be the acme of imbecility! – to discuss the magician's formulae of evocation.[17]

One of the most important and influential art critics of the twentieth century who had his own ties to Baudelaire was the American art critic Clement Greenberg (1909-1994) (fig.5). Both Baudelaire and Greenberg "located the origins of modernism around 1860."[18] As Greenberg wrote "Modernism emerged... with Baudelaire in literature and Manet in painting...."[19] In addition, Greenberg revered Baudelaire's art criticism, pronouncing the Frenchman as "no less incomparable as an art critic than as a poet."[20] Greenberg began his writing career in 1939 at *The Partisan Review*, a political and

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[16] Baudelaire, 44.

[17] Charles Baudelaire, *The Mirror of Art* (London: Phaidon Press, 1955), 196.

[18] David Carrier, *High Art: Charles Baudelaire and the Origins of Modern Painting.* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 20.

[19] Clement Greenberg, "Modern and Postmodern," *Arts Magazine* 54, no. 6 (February 1980): 63.

[20] John O'Brian, ed. *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), vol. 1, "Review of an Exhibition of Eugène Delacroix," 241.

literary journal where he was editor from 1940 to 1942, and continued to contribute until 1955. From 1942 to 1949 Greenberg was also the regular art critic for *The Nation*, a weekly left-leaning publication on politics and culture.

In 1939, *The Partisan Review* published his famous essay *Avant-Garde and Kitsch*. The content grew from Greenberg's (somewhat erroneous) concern that modernism (the avant-garde) would either not become popular or be widely accepted because of the mass commercialization and commodification of culture through Hollywood movies, magazines, popular music, advertisements, illustrations, even tap-dancing. This signaled the disintegration of taste, or connoisseurship and was exemplary of the passivity to culture of the American people. He put the onus on the avant-garde to maintain high cultural standards even as capitalism continued to manufacture kitsch as culture. However, Greenberg would soon pick up the thread of what was to be his dominant critical perspective – modernism.

In his 1940 essay *Towards a Newer Laocoön* the critic points toward abstraction as the path for painting in contemporary culture; it was crucial that painting move away from sculptural and literary tendencies, away from narrative and "meaning" and towards the primary importance of its own material condition: "The purely plastic or abstract qualities of the work of art are the only ones that count... The history of avant-garde painting is that of a progressive surrender to the resistance of its medium; which resistance consists chiefly in the flat picture plane's denial to 'hole through' it for realistic

perspectival space."[21]

Greenberg's definition of modernist painting posits a medium that reflects upon itself

to attain its "purity" as an art form: "The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use

of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to

subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence."[22]

Greenberg's theories and approach are possibly related to the area of literary

interpretation known as New Criticism, which had its inception in the early 1940's and

was highly influential until its waning in the late 1960's.[23] New Criticism has its base in

empiricism, the philosophy that all knowledge originates through experience, rather than

speculative or metaphysical philosophy. Exponents of the theory downplay historical

influences, social contexts, and authorial intention; any "meaning" in a work was to be

found in a close reading of its form and structure. For Clement Greenberg, the Abstract

Expressionists personified his theoretical outlook. The canvases of painters such as

Barnett Newman, Willem de Kooning, and especially (for Greenberg) Jackson Pollock

(fig. 6), embodied the notion of a self-critical, specific medium through the all-over

gestural quality of the work as well the flatness of the picture plane. With regard to the

"content" or "meaning" in the work, Greenberg reiterates that "[i]n itself, content remains

indefinable, unparaphrasable, undiscussable. Whatever Dante or Tolstoy, Bach or

Mozart, Giotto or David intended his art to be about, or said it was about, the works of

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[21] John O'Brian, ed. *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), vol. 1, "Towards a Newer Laocoön," 34.

[22] O'Brian, vol. 4, *Modernist Painting*, 85.

[23] The American poet, novelist, and literary critic Robert Penn Warren was one of the founders of the New Criticism movement.

his art go beyond anything specifiable in their effect. That is what art, regardless of the intention of the artists, *has* to do, even the worst art; the unspecifiability of its 'content' is what constitutes art as art."[24]

Greenberg's forceful writing and his often controversial stances on art made him the most important critic in America in the two decades following the Second World War, and his championing of the Abstract Expressionists helped establish New York as the new centre of the art world. However, when American Pop Art exploded onto the scene in the early 1960's Greenberg dismissed it (as he did Op Art, Minimalism and most of the movements that followed Abstract Expressionism) as "novelty art." The cultural and social references in Pop Art were anathema to the Greenbergian notion of the type of modernist painting that he continued to defend. The 1960's were a time of enormous social and cultural change, and young artists were beginning to question what they felt was a constrictive definition of modern painting prescribed by the old guard.

Greenberg's separation of social and cultural issues from art was seen by many as out of touch with contemporary cultural and societal concerns. The inevitable backlash to Greenberg's "ineluctable flatness of the pictorial surface" and his misreading of the impact of Pop Art lead to a waning of the critic's influence towards the end of the decade. In 1979, Clement Greenberg gave a lecture in Sydney, Australia titled *Modern and Postmodern* in which he stated that: "Now the threats to aesthetic standards, to quality, come from... friends of advanced art... (who) hold that Modernism is no longer advanced

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[24] John O'Brian, ed. *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), vol. 4, "Complaints of an Art Critic," 269.

enough...that it is to be hurried in to 'postmodernism'...just take a look at what these

'postmodern' people like and what they don't like in current art...they happen, I think, to

be a more dangerous threat to high-art than old-time philistines ever were. Underneath it

all lies...their bad taste in visual art."[25] Clement Greenberg saw the affront of

postmodernism as a relaxation in the taste, quality, and standards necessary to create

"high art;" postmodernism's pastiche was the theoretical and aesthetic anathema to

Greenberg's pictorial purity.

The singularity of Greenbergian modernism gave way to postmodern plurality which

is embodied by the writings of Arthur Coleman Danto (b.1924) (fig. 7). Danto become

The Nation's art critic in 1984, the year he retired from actively teaching analytical

philosophy at New York's Columbia University. Part of the methodology of analytical

philosophy is analyzing concepts and statements using common experience and ordinary

language rather than an over-specialized language and abstract hypotheticals. Danto

himself noted that "What I brought to my criticism was something I learned as a

philosophical writer – to write clearly, concisely and logically. Too much art writing was

and is jargonistic and windy. I had a good time writing the pieces, and I wanted the

reader to have a good time reading them. And, because I am a teacher, I wanted readers

to learn new ways of thinking about art."[26]

As a pluralist he believes that there is no one critical position or art style or movement

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[25] Clement Greenberg http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/postmodernism.html Accessed
November 25, 2006.
[26] Natasha Degen, "The Philosophy of Art: A Conversation With Arthur C. Danto," *The
Nation*, posted August 18, 2005 *web-only* (accessed May 05, 2007); available at
http://www.thenation.com/doc/20050829/danto; Internet.

(as, for example, Greenberg did) that is dominant in contemporary art. The meaning of

any art is dependent on the artists' intentions, its interpretation(s), and the

work's contemporary historical conditions – one must also look at surrounding social

conditions to understand the production of the piece and its content.[27] On the subject of

pluralism in art writing, Arthur Danto states "The beautiful thing about pluralism is that

there is no one way of doing anything. I subscribe to an aesthetic of meanings rather than

an aesthetic of forms. My interest is in finding the meanings and explaining how they are

embodied in works of art. That is what my writing is mostly about."[28]

Danto's conflation of philosophical and art writing first appeared *The Journal of*

Philosophy in 1964 in relation to a symposium on the topic of "The Work of Art." After

having seen Andy Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* (fig. 8) at the Stable Gallery in New York, he

commented at the symposium: "the Brillo people might...make their boxes out of

plywood without these becoming artworks, and Warhol might make *his* out of cardboard

without their ceasing to be art. So we may forget questions of intrinsic value, and ask

why the Brillo people cannot manufacture art and why Warhol cannot *but* make

artworks...*has* the whole distinction between art and reality broken down? "[29] Danto

wonders if indeed the entire world consists of "latent artworks waiting, like the bread and

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[27] While this approach has a decidedly Baudelarian slant, Danto is very much an admirer of Denis Diderot, stating the critic "did more than combine ekphrastic description with criticism or praise grounded in astute compositional analysis. Everything was an occasion for literary flight and philosophical digression." See: Arthur C. Danto, "Diderot on Art, 2 Vols. – book review," *ArtForum* 34, no. 3 (November 1995): 5.
[28] Danto, 5.
[29] Arthur Danto, "The Artworld," in *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 61, No. 19, American Philosophical Association Eastern Division Sixty-First Annual Meeting, Oct. 15, 1964, p 580; pp. 571-584. (Accessed December 15, 2006); available at Stable URL: http://links.jstor.org; Internet.

wine of reality, to be transfigured, through some dark mystery, into the indiscernible flesh and blood of the sacrament?"[30] This is the crux of Danto's approach to writing art criticism: what makes one thing *art*, and another not? Danto's art criticism often reads like a philosophical inquiry, where the critic searches the content of a work for meaning on a metaphysical level, rather than in the medium used or narrative concerns.

In his seminal 1984 essay *The End of Art*, Danto writes that in the destructured nature of the contemporary art world, what comes next is not as important as it was "pre" postmodernism. The model of style progression in the Western Canon could not accommodate an era where presenting ordinary objects like Brillo boxes and soup cans as art emphasized the problem of how to distinguish art works from ordinary things. What made things works of art was not their discernable or material qualities but their indiscernible ones; ergo, there was nowhere for the visual/style-centric art historical canon to go. Arthur Danto posits that with the advent of this post-historical condition, we have stopped looking for a *definition* of what art is, and this for Danto is critically liberating. In the pluralistic nature of the postmodern condition, art can do whatever it wants: "The age of pluralism is upon us. It does not matter any longer what you do, which is what pluralism means. When one direction is as good as another direction, there is no concept of direction any longer to apply."[31] In the postmodern era, anything can be art – that does not mean, however, that everything *is* art.

This new "freedom" when applied to art criticism is not without its problems. Some

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[30]Danto, 580-581.
[31]Danto, "The End of Art," in *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art.*
(New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 115.

say that postmodernism and its pluralistic character have weakened much of

contemporary criticism, as it often seems positionless and somewhat of a free for all. As

Arthur Danto noted:

> nowhere, it seems to me, is this license more evident than in the practice of
> criticism, where we badly need the phrase 'making criticism' to correspond to
> 'making art.' Not long ago, a major theorist [Donald Kuspit] raised a scandal
> by suggesting that criticism was where creativity was truly to be found, and that
> art in a way existed to make criticism possible. But in fact the distinction between
> art and criticism gives way when the critic is free to say anything at all, as so much
> of criticism seems to be.[32]

One could propose that there has been a tradition of art criticism that suggests a

benign movement but one which was supported largely by an informed audience reading

specialized periodicals and texts. With the advent of criticism on the World Wide Web a

plurality of views, which are advanced by a range of writers (specialist or not), is now

made easily available to a wide community in a comparatively effortless manner.

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[32]Danto, "Art, Evolution, and History," 209.

Hypertext: A term coined by Ted Nelson around 1965 for a collection of document (or 'nodes') containing cross-references or "links" which, with the aid of an interactive browser program, allow the reader to move easily from one document to another.[1]

CHAPTER TWO
Hypertext, the World Wide Web, and Literary Theory

The term "hypertext" may have only been around for a little more than four decades,

but the concept of hypertext has been with us for several centuries. One example from the

past is the "Renaissance Reading Wheel" (fig. 9), a sixteenth-century invention of

Captain Agostino Ramelli, who was a military engineer serving under Henry III of

France. In his *Le diverse et artificioise machine de Capitano Agostino Ramelli*,

published in Paris in 1588, he "...describes and illustrates a book wheel that holds from

twelve to twenty large folio volumes; it is 'cleverly constructed so that when the books

are laid in its lecterns they never fall out or move from the place where they are laid even

when the wheel is turned and revolved all the way around' making the required volumes

almost instantly available for easy consultation."[2] If we substitute Ted Nelson's 'nodes,'

links, and interactive browser program for books, lecterns, and ferry wheel, Ramelli's

Book Wheel becomes a nascent version of what we know today as hypertext.

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[1] Crashtips.com/macacronyms.html

[2] Leah S. Marcus, "The Silence of the Archive and the Noise of Cyberspace," in *The Renaissance Computer: Knowledge Technology in the First Age of Print*, ed. Neil Rhodes and Jonathan Sawday (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 19. Marcus notes that similar wheels were actually in use at the time and were recommended for lawyers as well as those suffering from gout. Captain Ramelli's reading wheel was never built during his lifetime, however four centuries later film director Richard Lester had a reading wheel based on Ramelli's design built as a prop for his 1974 movie *The Three Musketeers.*

Closer to our own time, in 1945, *The Atlantic Monthly* published an essay on the

hypertextual theories and plans of Dr. Vannevar Bush entitled "As We May Think." An

inventor and engineer, Bush was president of the Carnegie Institution of Washington

from 1939 to 1955, where he oversaw a team of over six thousand scientists and their

activities as applied to warfare during World War II.[3] The main thesis of his essay called

for a future of co-existence, where knowledge is shared by all, and it resonated against

the recent horrors of the Second World War. What Bush proposed was a device he called

a *memex* (figs. 10, 11 & 12), which would harness the enormous amount of knowledge in

the world in a way that would make it more accessible to everyone, not just scientists,

academics, or the intellectual elite. As he writes:

> Consider a future device for individual use, which is a sort of mechanized
> private file and library. It needs a name, and to coin one at random, 'memex.'
> A memex is a device in which an individual stores all his books, records, and
> communications, and which is mechanized so that it may be consulted with
> exceeding speed and flexibility. It is an enlarged intimate supplement to his
> memory.[4]

Bush goes on to describe the memex (which was never built) as a desk with keyboard,

buttons, levers, and screens. The information in the memex is written on microfilm and is

viewed through translucent screens. Whether the information be journal articles,

correspondence, or photographs etcetera, the user would have the ability to make

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[3] Bush was a central figure in the development of nuclear fission and the Manhattan
Project. The essay *As We May Think* had been around as early as 1936, but Bush had put
it aside in order to concentrate on his wartime duties.
[4] Vannevar Bush, *As We May Think*, accessed 07 July 2006; available from
http://www.ps.uni-sb.de/~duchier/pub/vbush/vbush-all.shtml; Internet. For further
reading see James M. Nyce and Paul Kahn's *From Memex to Hypertext: Vannevar Bush
and the Mind's Machine*; Boston: Academic Press, 1991.

marginal notes through the use of a stylus. In addition, Bush wrote that the memex could "presumably" be operated by the user at a distance, but did not elaborate as to what type of contemporary or future technology would enable this to happen.

However for Vannevar Bush, associative indexing was the essential feature of the memex: "the basic idea of which is a provision whereby any item may be caused at will to select immediately and automatically another. This is the essential feature of the memex. The process of tying two items together is the important thing."[5] He believed that indexing methods such as alphabetizing were inept because, as he stated, "The human mind does not work that way. It operates by association. With one item in its grasp, it snaps instantly to the next that is suggested by the association of thoughts, in accordance with some intricate web of trails carried by the cells of the brain."[6]

Vannevar Bush's memex machine allows for associative indexing, which we now recognize as a *link* in contemporary hypertext documents.[7] A further feature of the memex would be the ability of the user to "display two texts on a screen and then create links between passages in the texts. These links would be stored by the memex and would be available for later display and revision; collectively they would define a network of interconnections."[8] Such ideas find parallels in contemporary literary theorist Gérard Genette's notion of *transtextuality* which is comprised of five elements: *intertextuality* (quotations, for example), *paratextuality* (the framing elements of a text),

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[5] Bush.

[6] Bush.

[7] Vannevar Bush did in fact introduce such words as *links, linkages, chains,* and *web* as terminology when describing the memex.

[8] Jay David Bolter, *Writing Space: Computers, Hypertext, and the Remediation of Print.* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2001), 35.

metatextuality (text used to comment on other texts), *hypertextuality* (the superimposition of one text upon another and includes imitation, pastiche, parody), and *architextuality* (how each text links to the various types of discourse it is representative of).[9] Bush's proto-hypertextual information system, the memex, already incorporated aspects of Genette's notion of transtextuality such as hypertextuality and architextuality. In leaving this discussion of Vannevar Bush and his visionary idea of the memex, it is important to note that he felt contemporary methods of communicating, accessing, and reviewing the latest professional research results were also antiquated and inadequate. As he prophetically asserts: "the world has arrived at an age of cheap complex devices of great reliability; and something is bound to come of it."[10]

The memex was essentially a personal archive. In 1960, Theodore (Ted) Nelson, influenced by the basic principles of Vannevar Bush's "memex," initiated *Xanadu*, a hypertext-based project. Nelson's "docuverse," as he called it, "would be a public, but centrally managed, hyperlinked archive."[11] Xanadu was essentially a word processing system that could hold a multiplicity of documents. The documents in turn are placed parallel on a computer screen in order for the reader to compare them side-by-side and discern their similarities and differences. It is easy to see Nelson's docuverse as a precursor to what we know today as the World Wide Web.

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[9] Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), xviii-xix. Transtextuality would today be referred to more simply as *intertextuality*.

[10] Bush.

[11] Rune Dalgaard, *Hypertext and the Scholarly Archive: Intertexts, Paratexts and Metatexts at Work*. accessed 26 July 2005; available from http://imv.au.dk/~runed/pub/dalgaard_acmht01.html; Internet.

The World Wide Web is a hypertext-based, distributed information system originally created in 1989 by Tim Berners-Lee at CERN, the European Laboratory for Particle Physics near Geneva to facilitate sharing research information; the first website was launched in 1991. The Web presents the user with documents, called web pages, full of links to other documents or information systems. Selecting one of these links, the user can access more information about a particular topic. Web pages include text as well as multimedia, including images, video, animation, sound.

However, Ted Nelson is loathe to have Xanadu and the World Wide Web mentioned in the same breath. He considers the World Wide Web not only an over-simplification of some of his ideas, but it is also "raw, chaotic, and short-sighted...(Xanadu) has always been much more ambitious, proposing an entire form of literature where links do not break as versions change... in which there is a valid copyright system—a literary, legal and business arrangement—for frictionless, non-negotiated quotation at any time and in any amount."[12] Nelson further states that the World Wide Web's "one-way breaking links glorified and fetishized as 'websites,' those very hierarchical directories from which we sought to free users, and discarded the ideas (inherent in *Xanadu*) of stable publishing, annotation, two-way connection and trackable change."[13] The "wild west" nature of the volume and content of information on the World Wide Web was, in fact, what Nelson and his team were trying to prevent.

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[12] Ted Nelson, *Homepage* Accessed 06 January 2007; available from http://www.xanadu.com.au/ted/XUsurvey/xuDation.html; Internet.
In 1995 a journalist in *Wired* magazine referred to Xanadu as "vaporware," which in computer parlance denotes hardware or software announced far in advance and then either failing to emerge as touted or at all.
[13] Nelson.

In her 2000 essay discussing the increased volume of information generated by hypertext, hypermedia, and the "unmanaged" World Wide Web, Kathryn Sutherland commented on the problematics of this lack of supervision or administration, pointing to the possibility that "in its display of instantly accessible and multiply manipulable data, the computer screen will deliver information from the restraints of understanding."[14] Voicing similar concerns, Jay Bolter draws parallels between computer literacy and E.D. Hirsch's writing on educational reforms. Hirsch states in his 1987 book *Cultural Literacy*, that "to be culturally literate is to possess the basic information needed to thrive in the modern world... it is by no means confined to 'culture' narrowly understood as an acquaintance with the arts."[15] In Hirsch's chapter titled "What Americans Need to Know," there is an appendix called "The List" which is an alphabetical (and provisional) directory of "knowledge literate Americans tend to share."[16] As Bolter succinctly points out:

> Hirsch never demands deep knowledge of a subject; a literate person simply needs to touch the surface of a broad range of subjects. From this perspective cultural literacy does not require a knowledge of traditional texts; instead, it means access to the vocabulary needed to read and write effectively. And in fact, this operational definition is now making cultural literacy almost synonymous with computer literacy.[17]

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[14] Neil Rhodes and Jonathan Sawday, "Paperworlds: Imagining the Renaissance Computer," in *The Renaissance Computer: Knowledge Technology in the First Age of Print*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 12.

[15] E.D. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), xiii.

[16] Rhodes and Sawday, 146.

[17] Kaplan, Nancy, *What Jay David Bolter Has to Say...*, accessed 03 August 2006; available from http://www.ibiblio.org/cmc/mag/1995/mar/hyper/jdbcontexts_347.html; Internet.

Michael Heim, a writer and professor of Humanities at the University of Southern

California at Irvine, echoes similar concerns about the academic "superficiality" of the

World Wide Web: "Fragments, reused material, the trails and intricate pathways of

'hypertext'... all these advance the disintegration of the centering voice of contemplative

thought."[18] Even Vannevar Bush, while praising the possibilities of the memex, added

the caveat "for mature thought, there is no mechanical substitute."[19] Problems arise, for

example, when students conduct art historical research solely on the World Wide Web.

Without the interpretative skills learned through traditional library research methods,

to say nothing of the enormous amount of relevant topic material in print that is not even

hinted at on the web, student researchers place themselves in a precarious position.

Websites will often offer opinion disguised as information, or provide misinformation.

An example of this occurred when Vermont's Middlebury College recently banned the

citing of Wikipedia, the collaborative online encyclopedia, in student essays and exams.

In addition to concerns regarding the depth of understanding one can achieve by

"surfing" documents, hypertext also raises questions with regard to the traditional notions

of "author" and "text." Sarah Annes Brown states that "A hypertextual approach to the

corpus of literature available to Renaissance (or any) writers breaks down the distinctions

between individual works and problematizes ideas of authorial property, creating a sense

of what Derrida termed *débordement*."[20]

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[18] Landow, 129.
[19] Bush, 6.
[20] Sarah Annes Brown, "Arachne's Web," in *The Renaissance Computer: Knowledge Technology in the First Age of Print.* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 132.

Writing in 1977, Jacques Derrida was elaborating on printed texts, however what he

posits is uncannily prophetic of the text of hypertext:

> If we are to approach a text, it must have an edge. The question of the text, as
> it has been elaborated and transformed in the last dozen years or so, has not merely
> 'touched' 'shore,' *le bord...* all those boundaries that form the running border of
> what used to be called a text, of what we once thought this word could identify, i.e.,
> the supposed end and beginning of a work, the unity of a corpus, the title, the margins,
> the signatures, the referential realm outside the frame and so forth. What has
> happened, if it has happened, is a sort of overrun [*débordement*] that spoils all these
> boundaries and divisions and forces us to extend the accredited concept, the dominant
> notion of a 'text'... henceforth a text is no longer a finished corpus of fabric of traces
> referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces.[21]

The deconstructivist notions of fragmentation and deferral, so criticized by Clement

Greenberg, are inherent in the nature of hypertext. Additionally, deconstructionist

thinking asserts that fixed meaning in any text is impossible (or fallacious), as the

intrinsically unstable nature of language necessitates a myriad of possible meanings.

Thus, it is possible to see what minds like Jacques Derrida and Ted Nelson have in

common; neither adheres to centrist positions, linear thinking, or the concept of

hierarchies.[22] What both men do acknowledge - Derrida through deconstructive practice,

Nelson through the hypertext of the "docuverse" - is a world of multiplicities in which

knowledge and information can be gained in a non-canonical (non-sequential) way.

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[21] Jacques Derrida, "Living On," in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom.
(New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), 83.
[22] Nelson is a noted contrarian whose personal maxim is "most people are fools, most
authority is malignant, God does not exist, and everything is wrong."
Internet Pioneers; accessed January 26, 2007; available from
http://www.ibiblio.org/pioneers/nelson.html; Internet.

In addition to the parallels between hypertext and deconstructionist theory, hypertext equally exemplifies the poststructuralist concept of the "open text," wherein the reader fills in "gaps" and makes meaning as an active reader. A key element in reception aesthetics is the notion of gaps, those spaces within a text which the reader has to fill while reading, making him or her a contributor to the book's meaning. Michel Foucault defined such gaps in what he termed the *archaeology* of knowledge, whereby discourse is controlled by certain protocols and rules of exclusion, and furthermore is regulated and controlled within itself. Rather than look at the continuity or homogeneity within perpetuated or idealized discourses of knowledge, Foucault looks to the disruptions, the gaps in the norm as the places in which real knowledge occurs: "Discourses are multiple, discontinuous, originating and disappearing by chance."[23] Applying this course of thought to the entity of the book, he states,

> The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut...it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network...the book is not simply the object that one holds in one's hands...its unity is variable and relative. As soon as one questions that unity, it lows its self-evidence; it indicates itself, constructs itself, only on the basis of a complex field of discourse.[24]

Foucault could as easily be speaking of the intertextual nature of an art critical website.

Both Foucault and Derrida elicit notions of Gérard Genette's literary theory of the paratext. According to Genette, the paratext is comprised of "those liminal devices an

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[23] John Lye, *Some Post-Structuralist Assumptions*, accessed 03 March 2004; available from http://www.brocku.ca/english/courses/4F70/postruct.html; Internet.

[24] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (London and New York: Routledge), 26-27.

conventions, both within the book (peritext) and outside (epitext), that mediate the book to the reader."[25] The peritext consists of everything within the physical volume that is not the text itself – title and subtitles, tables of contents, illustrations, the dust jacket and its accompanying "blurbs," even a photograph of the author on the back flap. The epitext is comprised of those elements outside the bound book that also mediate it to the public – interviews, public response, reviews, an author's diaries or correspondence, advertising, and media attention. Though not the core text itself, these elements do affect our reception of the main work and also affect the way we read art criticism through the Internet.

In transposing the idea of paratext to a website, one can see how crucial the proper "frame" is to the success or failure of a site. Looking for texts such as those on art criticism on the World Wide Web is a more "superficial" way of researching than by the conventional means of libraries and paper archives. Often, an epitextual element of a particular site will influence our visiting that site, such as a certain notoriety or the reputation of its author(s). However, because of the immediacy of the medium and expectations of the user, if the peritextual frame - the graphics, hypermedia, links – fails to attract or keep our attention, we often click off and go elsewhere within mere seconds. Websites are aimed at specific audiences; what that desired audience scans at first glance and how it interprets what it sees on a given site is of paramount importance. There are millions of sites on the World Wide Web, and their paratexts are the barkers of the hypertextual world, signifiers that are there to communicate to us that this is the site we

[25] Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), xviii.

want. They are there to support the "text" of the site as well as promote it. Genette sums

up his idea of paratexts thusly:

> More than a boundary or sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a *threshold*, or -
> a word Borges used apropos of a preface – a 'vestibule' that offers the world at
> large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back. It is an 'undefined
> zone' between the inside and the outside, a zone without any hard and fast boundary
> on either the inward side (turned toward the text) or the outward side (turned toward
> the world's discourse about the text), an edge, or, as Philippe Lejeune put it, 'a fringe
> of the printed text which in reality controls one's whole reading of the text.'[26]

The more visually comprehensive a website is, that is the more authority it carries in the

language of its paratexts, then the more authority the author(s) text(s) will carry on that

site.

The relationship and roles of author and reader, and the conventional notions of both,

are challenged by hypertext in several ways. For one, the author and the reader are

brought much closer together by the nature of the medium, despite being part of two very

separate spheres of engagement. As discussed, with hypertext, the reader becomes an

active reader, and sometimes an interactive reader. There are sites for art criticism where

one can insert links into another's text, or insert additional text or commentary to the

original (indeed, these sites echo the "read-write" systems Vannevar Bush and Ted

Nelson had envisioned). In this way, some of the authority of previously perceived ideas

of the "author" is challenged; some of the power of the sphere of the author is

relinquished. All of this has important implications for art criticism on the World Wide

Web.

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[26] Genette, 1-2. In the original French, the title of *Paratexts* was *Seuils*, which translates
as *threshold*.

This facet of the hypertextual environment concerns people like Michael Heim, who believe that, "as the authoritativeness of text diminishes, so too does the recognition of the private self of the creative author."[27] By extension, the web surfer/reader clicking on to Heim's text in a sense causes the text to "be," and in a way they too become a creative author in choosing the links and paths that they follow. Heim's fear of the "disappearance" of the author may have had its incubation in Roland Barthe's 1977 essay *The Death of the Author*. In this seminal text, Barthes states that we are trained to think that there is a part of the author's own biography in his book, and that we look (consciously or not) to that authority to provide some meaning to the text: "Once the author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing."[28] Barthes posits that the author is merely a scriptor, that language speaks, not the author... to write is... to reach that point where only language acts, 'performs,' and not 'me'."[29]

Indeed, Barthes states that the meaning of a text lies with the reader: "a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures, and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as it was hitherto said, the author...a text's unity lies not

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[27] Michael Heim, *Electric Language: A Philosophical Study of Word Processing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 221; quoted in George P. Landow, *Hypertext 3.0: Critical theory and New Media in an Era of Globalization* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 126.
[28] Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), 147.
[29] Barthes, 143.

in its origin but in its destination."[30] Thus Barthes voices the poststructuralist idea of subjectivity as a fluctuating entity, constructed by equally unstable categories of language and discourse. However, rather than the (hyper)text's meaning lying with the reader as Barthes would have it or with the author as it seems Heim would have it, perhaps it lies where the author and the reader link up in cyberspace, where the interstitial nature of the hypertextual medium allows for a more mutual correspondence.

Another way in which the idea of the author is questioned is that both hypertext and contemporary theory recognize the author of a text *as* a text. Roland Barthes elucidates the concept: "this 'I' which approaches the text is already itself a plurality of other texts, of codes which are infinite."[31] To see the author himself as hypertextual recognizes the notions of fragmentation and deferral in the theoretical concerns of Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida.

Postmodern thought concurs in the belief that technologies are also "socially constructed…the computer as a writing technology must be defined by (changing) social and economic needs and preferences…."[32] Since the advent of television we are becoming increasingly dependent on the "instant" visual as a means of communication through constant use of email, text-messaging through cell phones, the Blackberry, etc. In addition we are more and more using hypermedia as a means to provide entertainment

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[30] Barthes, 143.
[31] Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1970), 10; Ibid, 126.
[32] Jay David Bolter, "Ekphrasis, Virtual Reality, and the Future of Writing," in *The Future of the Book*, ed. Geoffrey Nunberg (University of California Press, 1996), 254.

and cultural pursuits through for example, virtual art gallery and museum visits.[33]

Jay Bolter describes our place in time as "the late age of print."[34] His play on words

refers to Frederic Jameson's characterization of our age as the "late age of

capitalism: "What 'late' generally conveys is rather the sense that something has

changed, that things are different, that we have gone through a transformation of the life

world..."[35] For Jameson, late capitalism does not mean capitalism is dead; rather it

recognizes a changed system that operates globally.[36] Electronic technology is expanding

in ways that are not possible through the medium of print, such as the global potentials

that hypertext poses through notions of interactivity, creativity and 'play.'

What hypertext also does is to dispel the long-held belief in text as fixed and stable,

though that is not to say, as some over-zealous technophiles have pronounced, that the

book is dead. The topic of New Criticism was broached in Chapter One of this thesis in

relation to the critic Clement Greenberg. Jay Bolter explains how this school of critical

reading "closes" a text:

> What New Criticism made explicit was an implicit assumption of most writing
> in the age of printing. Through the technology of printing, the author and the
> editor could exercise absolute control over the text: nothing they did could be
> undone after publication. Because everything on the page was part of the author's
> design, it was natural to assume that even the smallest details were part of the
> poem's meaning... In the first half of the twentieth century, the influential New

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[33] Wolfgang Ernst notes, "Significantly, downloaded images generated by web-cams are no longer called an *archive* (a term which belongs to paper-based memory), but a *gallery* (the visual realm)." Wolfgang Ernst, "Dis/continuities" in *New Media Old Media: A History and Theory Reader*, eds. Wendy Chun, Hui Kyong and Thomas W. Keenan (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 109.

[34] Bolter, *Writing Space*, 3.

[35] Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), xxi.

[36] Bolter, 3.

Criticism conceived of a (work) in terms appropriate to a printed text: self-sufficient, perfect, and untouchable.[37]

In contrast, hypertext on the World Wide Web is an ungoverned information system; there are no "rules" as to content, grammar, etc., as there are in print media. Anyone can create a site and write whatever they like, promote whichever concerns or ideas they care to. Certainly, this has had an impact on the hierarchical aspect of traditional notions of culture, for as Jay Bolter notes, "one consequence of this networking culture is in fact the abandonment of the ideal of high culture (literature, music, the fine arts) as a unifying force. If there is no single culture, only a network of interest groups, then there can be no single favoured [art], literature, or music."[38]

As previously discussed in this chapter, Roland Barthes opined that to give a text an author places a finality on a text, or "closes the writing" as he stated it. Barthes relates this imposition as essential to the practice of criticism:

> Such a conception suits criticism very well, (criticism) then allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author (or its hypostases: society, history, psyche, liberty) beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is 'explained' – victory to the critic. Hence there is no surprise that the reign of the Author has also been that of the Critic, nor again in the fact that criticism (be it new) is today undermined with the author.[39]

Such concerns are intrinsic to the understanding of art critical writing on the World Wide Web. On a less theoretical level, an interesting element to consider is the material, or physical nature of reading a book or a magazine article, where part of the pleasure of the

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[37] Bolter, 164-165.
[38] Bolter, 205.
[39] Barthes, 147.

experience is the tactile quality of the medium itself. Taking up this thread Jay Bolter

remarks on the physicality of hypertextual writing:

> The most unusual feature of electronic writing is that it is not directly accessible
> to either the writer or the reader. The bits of the text are simply not on a human
> scale. Electronic technology removes or abstracts the writer and reader from the
> text. If you hold a magnetic tape or optical disc up to the light, you will not see text
> at all... In the electronic medium, several layers of sophisticated technology must
> intervene between the writer or reader and the coded text. There are so many levels
> of deferral that the reader or writer is hard put to identify the text at all: is it on the
> screen, in the transistor memory, or on the disc?[40]

It is a postmodern paradox that this medium, seemingly so "immediate," is similarly

intangible, a fact that has repercussions for the tactile dimension and aura of presence that

is essential to the majority of art works.

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[40] Jay David Bolter, *Writing Space: The Computer in the History of Literacy* (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Erlbaum, 1990), 42-43.

For the 'message' of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs. The railway did not introduce movement or transportation or wheel or road in to human society, but it accelerated and enlarged the scale of previous human functions, creating totally new kinds of cities and new kinds of work and leisure. This happened whether the railway functioned in a tropical or a northern environment, and is quite independent of the freight or content of the railway medium. The airplane, on the other hand, by accelerating the rate of transportation, tends to dissolve the railway form of city, politics, and association, quite independently of what the airplane is used for.[1]

CHAPTER THREE
Background to Three Case Studies

To say that the condition of art criticism on the World Wide Web is ambiguous in nature would not be an overstatement. While there is a plethora of art writing/critical websites, there are few where we would recognize "professional" critical writing. For example JSTOR, the Scholarly Journal Archive, allows important access to art criticism in print publications, but it is a database and not a website. The majority of art critical websites are weblogs or *blogs,* as they are known in the common vernacular. A blog is a publicly accessible personal journal for an individual, similar to a journal or personal diary, but shared over the web. The activity of updating a blog is "blogging" and someone who keeps a blog is a "blogger." Blogs are typically updated daily using software that allows people with little or no technical background to update and maintain their comments. The issue of art critical blogs is an important one, often overlooked in the myriad "the state of art criticism" debates that have been proliferating over the last decade or so.

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[1] Marshall McLuhan, "The Medium is the Message," in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man.* (Scarborough, Ontario: New American Library), 24.

The three websites I have chosen to examine are quite different from one another both in their visual presentation and framework as well as in the types of art writing they provide. I will discuss aspects of both of those elements in this chapter and will also briefly outline the experiential backgrounds of some of the writers and editors I will be mentioning in order to establish the heterogeneous nature of the category of art critic and, by extension, art criticism.

The first site to examine is *artnet Magazine* (fig. 13), which is part of a highly polished and professional commercial website called *artnet*. In addition to the magazine, the *artnet* site also has price databases and pages on international market trends and auction information, as well as a burgeoning *Artist's Works Catalogues* database. The editor of *artnet Magazine* is Walter Robinson, who, among other achievements, was a contributing editor at *Art in America* for twenty years. He is also a painter whose work has been in gallery exhibitions since the early 1980's.

The second web site is *artsJournal (the daily digest of arts, culture, and ideas)* (fig. 14). *artsJournal* aggregates arts newspaper articles from around the English-speaking world and posts them daily on its website. In addition, *artsJournal* hosts a substantial number of weblogs. I will discuss one of the blogs hosted by the *artsJournal* website, *Modern Art Notes* in order to address that medium's influence on the genre of art critical writing. The editor of *artsJournal*, Douglas McLennan, holds a Master's degree in music from Julliard and wrote music criticism for Salon.com, one of the first media-based Internet companies. Douglas McLennan has also written for such publications as the

London Evening Standard and the *New York Times* and has been the recipient of several awards for art writing and reporting.

The final website I will be examining, *(Haber's Art Reviews)* (fig. 15), is operated by a single person, John Haber of New York City. *Haber's Art Reviews* is not a commercial or affiliated website yet in some respects is more than a blog. Haber reviews exhibitions in depth and gives his critical and personal opinions to a spectrum of visual arts. He has a PhD in physics from Princeton University and is currently a development editor for Oxford University Press.

I came to choose these three sites by way of using the Google Search Engine. Put simply, Internet search engines such as Google, Yahoo!, AltaVista and others maintain databases of web sites and use programs to collect information, which are then indexed by the search engine. Google uses a Page Ranking System to rate the "importance" of sites relative to the user's search phrase. PageRank relies on the democratic (although manipulable) nature of the web by using its vast link structure as an indicator of an individual page's value. In essence, Google interprets a link from page A to page B as a vote by page A for page B. The search engine also analyzes the page that casts the vote; votes cast by pages that are themselves "important" weigh more heavily and help to make other pages "important." Using these and other factors, Google provides its views on a page's relative importance. However, it is important to note that the because of the "democratic" nature of the Internet, PageRank and therefore Google, can be manipulated by a process known as "Google Bombing" which "involves simply linking a large number of sites to a certain page (which) can raise the ranking of any given site in

Google's search results...anyone with a bit of tech savvy can rig the supposedly democratic Internet by repeatedly hyperlinking or cross-linking certain pages that they want to show up first in Google searches."[2]

An analogous type of "ranking" system recently turned up in the print media on the topic of critics. I include an overview of this survey as concerns the category of art critic in order to establish a sense of the current climate in print-based art critical writing. The survey was conducted under the auspices of *Time Out New York*, which is a weekly listing magazine that contains information about events in film, theatre, fashion, literature and other artistic events happening in the city.[3] The 7-13 December 2006 issue was titled "New York Critics," with the sub-heading "Critiquing the Critics: Judgment Day." A panel of artists, curators and others from the New York cultural industry voted and commented anonymously on a selection of prominent local critics in the fields of art, books, dance, film, food, music and theatre. The criteria for judging was based on five categories – knowledge, style, taste, accessibility and influence. Points were given based on a grading system of one to six, one being the lowest score.

Overall, the critics of the *New York Times* were credited with being the most influential, in large part due to the publication they work for and the patina of power and journalistic integrity of the newspaper. In the art review category however, the *Village Voice's* Jerry Saltz received the highest score. While some of the panel's comments on Saltz's criticism pointed to his occasional see-sawing on previously stated opinions in

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[2] Andrew Keen, *The Cult of the Amateur: How Today's Internet is Killing Our Culture.* (New York, London: Doubleday/Currency, 2007), 93.
[3] There are twenty other city-specific *Time Out* weekly listings magazines; the original was *Time Out London* first published in 1968.

order to keep up with the temper of the moment in the art world, as well as his periodic

vitriol, the overall assessment was that Saltz: "starts a dialogue that needs to exist... is one

of our best critics... he is indefatigable, passionate, and opinionated."[4]

Jerry Saltz (b.1951) holds no academic degrees. He began as an artist, but quit

painting and was for a time a long-distance truck driver. But Saltz missed the art world:

"All I know is that I loved art and had to be part of the art world."[5] In the early 1980's he

began freelancing and wrote for such publications as *Flash Art*, *Frieze*, *Time Out*,

eventually landing a monthly column in *Arts magazine* in the early 1990's. He joined the

Village Voice in 1995 as the paper's art critic, and in April 2007 joined *New York*

Magazine as their in-house art critic. Saltz began writing art criticism at the age of forty

in response to the obtuse art critical language of the 1980's, which he felt was detrimental

to bringing art to a broader audience. He describes his approach to writing criticism thus:

> My only position is to let the reader in on my feelings, to try to write in
> straightforward, jargon-free language; not oversimplify or dumb down my
> responses; aim to have an idea, a judgment, or a description in every sentence;
> not take too much for granted; explain how artists might be original or derivative
> and how they use techniques and materials; observe whether they're developing
> or standing still; provide context; and make judgments that hopefully amount to
> more than just my personal opinion.[6]

John Haber responded to the *Time Out New York* survey on his own website, noting

that not so long ago, one would have looked to publications like *Art in America* during

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[4] "Critiquing the Critics: Judgment Day." *Time Out New York* 584, (December 07-13, 2006, accessed April 14, 2007); available at
http://www.timeout.com/newyork/Details.do?page=1&xyurl=xyl://TONYWebArticles1/584/features/art.xml; Internet.

[5] "Seeing Out Loud." *Village Voice* (December 16, 2005, accessed May 23, 2007); available at http://www.villagevoice.com/art/0551,saltz,71107,13.html; Internet.

[6] Peter Plagens, "Contemporary Art, Uncovered," *Art in America* 95, no. 2 (February 2007): 51.

the time of Thomas Hess, or Clement Greenberg's writings in *Partisan Review* or *The Nation*, rather than look to the newspapers for New York's most influential critic. Haber points out that the omission of certain publications in the survey such as *The Nation*, *Artforum*, and *October* skewed the meaning of "influential" in this case to mean, "Who gets to tell New Yorkers what to do this week-end."[7] He goes on to say that the criteria for ranking the critics did not include categories such as depth or insight, and thus perpetuates types of criticism with less intellectual aspirations, and that this type of "criticism" plays instead to an increasingly commercial art scene and its attendant voracious art market.

Roberta Smith (b.1948), an art critic for the New York Times, echoed similar sentiments at a lecture at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in October 2005.[8] She described art criticism as "occupying a sliver of territory between theory/history and market/advocacy...the boundaries of this territory are largely claimed by critics themselves...as art criticism has become more often subsidized by the art critics, its function has become less well understood." "The importance of terror" is how Smith prefaced her comments on the role of the Internet in art criticism. According to Smith, the verdict is still out as to whether the immediacy of online publishing in fact affects the art market, but the immediate Web review has more impact than the late print edition. But mark her up as a blog skeptic as she likened blogs to "phone conversations," as

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[7] John Haber, "Top Honors," accessed June 10, 2007; available from http://www.haberarts.com/truckart.htm; Internet. The exclusion of *The Nation* in the survey stands out particularly because its art critic is Arthur Danto. Haber also noted, tongue-in-cheek, the omission of the *Haberarts* website from the survey.
[8] Roberta Smith and Jerry Saltz were married in July 1992.

something "stuck in the ether."[9]

Certainly in the last several years there has been a fair amount of published hand wringing regarding the state of art criticism. For example, James Elkins (b. 1955), art history professor at the School of the Chicago Art Institute, published a slim volume titled *What Happened to Art Criticism?* in which he states "Art criticism [in 2003] is in worldwide crises. Its voice has become weak, and it is dissolving into the background clutter of ephemeral cultural criticism...yet at the same time art criticism is healthier than ever. Its business is booming: it attracts an enormous amount of writers..."[10] Elkins is alluding to the fact that the art market, awash with rich investors, engenders the need for writers on the subject. When the market takes an upturn, however, art criticism is something lacking in intellectual debate, and instead becomes the site of non-judgmental description, a kind of brochure writing for prospective buyers. The recent collection of essays *Critical Mess: Art Critics and the State of their Practice* features art writers such as Arthur C. Danto, Peter Plagens, and Jerry Saltz. Some essays in the collection do confront the issue of the current state of art criticism with indignation while simultaneously advancing definitions of good art criticism; often the writers do not shy away from naming particular critics and pointing out the failings with their approach to the genre. [11]

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[9]Three Lectures: Roberta Smith. Smithsonian American Art Museum (accessed April 24, 2007); available from http://eyelevel.si.edu/2006/02/three_lectures_.html; Internet.

[10] James Elkins, *What Happened to Art Criticism?* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), 2.

[11] Raphael Rubinstein, *Critical Mess: Art Critics on the State of Their Practice* (Lennox, Massachusetts: Hard Press Editions, 2006.

However, what is not sufficiently addressed in all of the discussion is the role of hypertext and the Internet in the changing faces of art critical writing. The single thing that has had the most influence on contemporary popular culture in the last ten years is the personal computer. Indeed, in the introductory paragraph to the *Time Out New York* survey previously cited, an anonymous author states of the critics being ranked in the survey: "At least they're pros, unlike the thousands of armchair analyzers equipped with nothing more than an opinion and a blog."[12] This type of animosity between professional and what are mostly amateur writers runs high. In a recent article, the painter and critic Peter Plagens notes that the sheer quantity of art currently being produced should logically result in a situation where there is enough work being produced to engage established art writers as well as employing more art critics in the print media. However, arts coverage in newspapers has declined steadily over the last twenty years. Plagens suggests that one explanation is that the "subscriber base is aging...younger readers are harder to get into the fold...competition from the Internet is forcing news magazines to morph even more radically than they had to when TV news came into its own in the late 1960's."[13]

For many bloggers, the most important aspect of the changes wrought by the Internet is the (so-called) democratization of the media and its by-product of instant reader participation. As Plagens notes, "Readers not only want to talk back on screen, they want to see their back talk posted right next to the paid writer's stuff," and "More and more

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[12] Time Out New York.

[13] Peter Plagens, "Contemporary Art, Uncovered," *Art in America* 95, Issue 2 (February 2007), 47.

people in the audience for contemporary art would rather read Tyler Green snark [a

vernacular expression meaning a pejorative style of speech or writing] somebody in his

blog *Modern Art Notes*, than ponder the considerable judgment of Michael Kimmelman

[the chief art critic at the New York Times] on a Museum of Modern Art retrospective."[14]

Tyler Green's art blog *Modern Art Notes* has been hosted by *artsJournal* since

January 2003. A journalist, Green is a member of the United States section of the

International Association of Art Critics (AICA) and his articles and features have

appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, the *Boston Globe*, the *New York

Observer*, *LA Weekly*, and others. He was the art critic for *Bloomberg News* from 2004

until 2005, and the Washington, DC critic for *artnet* magazine from March 2003 to

August 2004. Green replied to Plagens in his January 30, 2007 blog:

> Comparing a blog - which is a medium-to art criticism - which is a writerly,
> often journalistic format-is like comparing film to a Henny Youngman one-line.
> Why have bloggers found an audience-and a growing one at that? Bloggers are
> writerly entrepreneurs. Instead of expecting an audience to come to us in the
> musty art magazines, we work to earn readers, to build audiences, to be a writerly
> 'brand.' Many bloggers, myself included, have consciously rejected the 'traditional'
> art criticism model because it is confining and appropriate only for 'dino-media.[15]

It is interesting that Tyler Green wants to be a writerly "brand," which sounds rather like

his charge against print media critics. Equally troubling is the fact that Green refers to art

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[14] Plagens, 47. As an example of the arbitrary nature of the topic of critics, Michael
Kimmelman in fact scored third behind fellow New York Times art critic Roberta Smith.
Much of the anonymous commentary provided by the panel of judges of the *Time Out
New York* survey criticized Kimmelman's blinkered attitudes towards contemporary art
and his seeming intellectual snobbery.
[15] Tyler Green, *Modern Art Notes* (January 30, 2007); Accessed April 17, 2007.
available at http://www.artsjournal.com/man/2007/01/responding_to_pp.html; Internet.

criticism as a "format," but history has shown that art critical writing is heterogeneous by nature. I wanted to know how he defined "traditional art criticism" and so I e-mailed Green and asked him what it was in his opinion. He replied: "Well, most simply: wait for an exhibition and then review it in the dead-tree media. Not very complicated, but the practice is pretty straightforward I think! T."[16] I was surprised not only by the brevity and curtness of his reply, but also by the evasive nature of his response. As previously demonstrated, Green rails against "traditional" art criticism and critics; rather than provide one of his "democratized, participatory" readers with a solid statement, he appears merely as smug and condescending, a complaint he has about the "dino-media."

Tyler Green's writing on art in his *Modern Art Notes* blog can be equally bereft. For example, in discussing the painting *Young Sailor II* by Henri Matisse (1906), Green begins his blog entry by saying that the painting is "surely the most shocking portrait of the 20th century."[17] However, he never says *why*. In this blog posting he mentions Picasso, a Matisse self-portrait, Alfred Barr, and a bit of the art-historical story behind the creation of *Young Sailor II*, but never really addresses his opening pronouncement.

In October of 2004, the New York Foundation for the Arts' website, *NYFA Interactive*, asked Green to write an essay on how blogs have changed and will continue to change the nature of art criticism in the 21st century. He wrote (somewhat contradictorily) that blogs had not as yet changed anything about the way in

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[16] Author's correspondence with Tyler Green April 17, 2007.
[17] Tyler Green, *Modern Art Notes* (May 09, 2007);
http://www.artsjournal.com/man/2007/05/matisses_young_sailor_times_tw.html;
Internet.

which art criticism is written, mostly because bloggers were more "observers than critics."[18]

However, Green did state that blogs had an impact on art criticism, saying that the media and nature of blogs ensure that good art-writing, wherever it may be, even in the smallest local newspaper will be read nationwide: "Thanks to blogs, the best art writing is read by more people, in more places, than ever before."[19] Peter Plagens does assert that a number of art writers have started their own (unpaid) blogs or have their blog hosted by sites such as *artsJournal* or *artnet Magazine,* because of decreasing print-media outlets. Nevertheless, "many bloggers don't have enough writerly inclination or discipline anyway. Each of those bloggers has a following of fans and other bloggers, and each of those blogger has...and so on. A growing form of art criticism consists of posting links to other people's criticism, which consists of posting links...and so on."[20] This has the effect of deferring the meaning or intention of the original criticism, and the boundaries between author and reader begin to blur, as theorists had earlier stated in regard to traditional print media.

A recent study by Pew Internet & American Life Project found that there are approximately twelve million bloggers in the United States and that "thirty-four percent

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[18] NYFA Interactive (October 13, 2004); accessed April 2007; available from http://www.nyfa.org/archive_detail_c.asp?id=272&fid=6&sid=17&date=10/13/2004; Internet.

[19] NYFA Interactive.

[20] Plagens, 48.

journalists in America alone."[21] Glenn Reynolds, a University of Tennessee law

professor who operates a popular political blog called *Instapundit,* believes that "Millions

of Americans who were once in awe of the punditocracy now realize that anyone can do

this stuff and that many unknowns can do it better than the lords of the

profession."[22] These sentiments are easily transferable to art writing on the World Wide

Web. The "us-versus-them" mentality of Tyler Green and others who see the Internet as

a kind of writerly utopia constantly harp on art critics and writers who fail to

communicate in plain English, and this is a legitimate point. Overly jargonized and

hyper-theoretical art writing and criticism can be dry and alienating, even to those who

are in the field. However, this is not true of the whole of art writing that is available in

print media, and it is reactionary to state it as so. Furthermore, it is ridiculous to think that

access to a platform such as the World Wide Web translates into good art critical writing.

I wanted to know what the editors of the three web sites I was investigating thought

about the various types art writing to be found on the Internet. I sent an e-mail to Walter

Robinson, editor-in-chief of *artnet Magazine,* Douglas McLennan, founder and editor of

artsJournal, and John Haber at his *Haber's Art Reviews* blog asking the following:

"What do you find are the differences between writing art criticism for print and writing

it for the Web? That is to say, in what ways do you think writing art criticism for the

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[21] Nicholas Lemann, "Amateur Hour: Journalism Without Journalists," *The New Yorker* 82, No. 24 (August 7 & 14, 2006), 44. The Pew Internet & American Life Project produces reports that explore the impact of the Internet on families, communities, work and home, daily life, education, health care, and civic and political life. The Project aims to be an authoritative source on the evolution of the Internet through collection of data and analysis of real-world developments as they affect the virtual world.

[22] Lemann, 44.

Web has changed its practice and reception?" Walter Robinson's reply focused on blogs,

stating: "Blogs allow writers to write without the guiding hand of editors, and the results

are dramatic—dramatically bad."[23] In fact, a blog Robinson names as an example is

Tyler Green's *Modern Art Notes*: "Without an editor, all kinds of nonsense can be posted

by a writer without any oversight. What's worse, with Tyler, his opinions carry

weight… a close examination of his blog suggests that he is a person who sits at his

computer all day, surfing museum and art websites and throwing out his two cents.

Hardly a recipe for informed visual commentary."[24]

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[23] Author's correspondence with Walter Robinson, April 02, 2007.
[24] Author's correspondence with Walter Robinson, April 02, 2007.

The world has arrived at an age of cheap complex devices of great reliability and something is bound to come of it.[25]

CHAPTER FOUR
Three Art Writing Websites on the World Wide Web

Artnet, launched in 1995, is the most sophisticated of the three sites I have chosen to examine and it is aimed directly at the high-end art market. *artnet.com* is comprised of several sections: the first is an artist's database wherein one types in the name of the artist of interest and a page appears with reproductions of his or her work that are for sale. Included on this page are the artist's biography and exhibition history, along with the names of the galleries (from *artnet's* "Galleries" database) that are currently selling the artist's work. A telling paratextual element to this page is a rectangular-shaped box with tiny reproduction of a Pollock, a Lichtenstein, and a Warhol – recognizable images covering a range of taste bases. Under the reproductions is the question "What's your budget?" One can then tick off a price range and search for what is available through those galleries that are member of *artnet's* Galleries database. Running down the left-hand side of the page are reproductions that are eye-catching and appealing, and you find yourself clicking your mouse on the images to find out more about the artist and their work.

Another page on this web site is "Market Trends," a service that must be purchased. Put simply, type in an artist's name and you will get a performance report in graph form

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[25] Bush.

on how the artist's work has sold over the last eight years, thereby helping you to estimate possible purchases and track what is selling in the art market. There is also an Auction page, which lists upcoming worldwide auctions, recent auction results, the top prices, and an Art Market Watch. This leads to the Price Database page, which offers several subscription packages to individuals and dealers; the price database allows you to "research independently and discreetly...track market changes in artist's work."[26] The website's Events page is a listing of exhibitions and shows from around the world. The "jet-set" tone of the page is furthered by an advertisement for clothes by designer/perfumer Diane von Furstenberg. A high-end name in the fashion business, von Furstenberg creates exclusive designs for such select stores as Saks Fifth Avenue and Neiman Marcus. The people who can afford Diane von Furstenberg's creations are the kind of clientele *artnet* is looking to attract.

Similarly, the site's Home Page hosts another DVF ad, along with a list of site sponsors such as AXA Art Insurance and L'Avion, an exclusively Business Class airline. The paratextual elements on this web site concern commerce, power, position and most of all money. Indeed, as stated on the site's "About Us" page, this is *artnet's* raison d'etre:

> The art business is international, but is conducted locally by tens of thousands of geographically dispersed dealers, galleries, auction houses, print publishers, museums and collectors in a relatively inefficient marketplace. Observing the inefficiencies in the art business, *artnet* developed its first product, the Price Database, to bring transparency to the art market...today *artnet* is a critical tool,

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[26]*artnet*. Accessed June 24, 2007; available at
http://www.artnet.com/net/Services/PriceDatabase.aspx; Internet.

providing its members dealers with global market access, significant incremental revenue opportunities, and cost-effective marketing solutions during a contested economic period."[27]

artnet Magazine is the only page on this website where one finds local and international art world news, essays on artists or current topics in the art world, reviews and criticism of museum and gallery exhibitions both local and international, and book reviews the topics of which range from the writings of Mieke Bal to a monograph on Tiepolo to a collection of the critical writings of the late Lawrence Alloway. There is usually one feature article per day on the web site, and all articles contain a visual component – a reproduction or illustration that relates to the artist or art-world topic that is the subject of the article; previous articles are listed by descending date to the right of each day's main essay. Contributors to the online magazine are a diverse group, and include Donald Kuspit, well-known professor of art history and philosophy at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, art critic, Jerry Saltz, senior editor at *New York Magazine,* and Charlie Finch, who has been writing about art in New York for fifteen years and has managed to offend just about everyone at one time or another.

The choice of such writers sends the message that this site is intelligent, "with-it," and not above an occasional bit of art world gossip. Donald Kuspit's articles posted on the *artnet* site are thoughtfully constructed, erudite pieces that speak to his academic background without resorting to jargon. For example, in a recent lengthy essay on the work of artist Rebecca Horn he writes:

If, as *Salomé* and *Der Eintänzer* (1978) suggest, the gist and theme of Horn's art is

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[27] *artnet.* Accessed June 24, 2007; available from http://www.artnet.com/about/aboutindex.asp?F=1, Internet.

dancing – if it is a kind of translation of dancing into painterly and sculptural terms, of the energy and body involved in transient dance movements into more permanent terms (enduring mnemonic traces of dancing, as it were) – then the question is this: What is the function and meaning of dancing for her, and what kind of dancing?[28]

Kuspit goes on to state: "For me, Horn's signature work – the work that epitomizes her view of dancing as creativity at its most dynamic, and as such the consummate expression of female desire and élan vital – is her 1988 *Painting Machine*. It is perhaps the most abstractly convincing representation of her body ego – her most revealing self-portrait."

Certainly Kuspit believes criticism is an indispensable part in the creation of art; he writes:

> The critic must become independent enough to begin the difficult task of descending onto the depths of the work...All (critical) methods...are subsumed in the attempt to determine the work's intentionality, which can only be done by the critic with the aim of determining his own intentionality through the work. It is its complex, often slowly revealed, intentionality which gives the work its staying power, and the critic can grasp that intentionality only by becoming a participant observer (participant creator, even) in the work, which requires that he become conscious of his own intentionality, seeing it as well as the work itself as "complex."[29]

Malcolm Gee, a principal lecturer in art history at the University of Northumbria, Newcastle, paraphrases Kuspit: "it is critical writing which reveals meaning in contemporary art, not by anchoring it to a single interpretation, but by opening up its

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[28] Donald Kuspit, *The Machine Self and the Squiggle Game* (September 17, 2007); available from http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/kuspit/kuspit9-17-07.asp; Internet.

[29] Donald Kuspit, *The Critic is Artist: The Intentionality of Art*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1984), 81.

potentially limitless depth. In this view the institution of criticism is not just central to the art world, but it is a creative process in its own right, without which art-making would have no point."[30]

In contrast, literary theorist Gérard Genette sees the critic as a *bricoleur*, one who builds or constructs something out of any materials he or she has at hand, suitable or not, merely for the sake of constructing the thing. For Genette, it is the artist who is the engineer. As such, the critic is secondary to the artist but is positioned so as to be an authority on culture, an arbiter of taste. The critic reads as signs what the artist has created as a cultural production, a work constructed as much by the norms of the time and place in which it was made, as by the artist. According to Genette, whatever meaning a critic finds in a work is a direct reflection of the discourse of the culture that surrounded its production. Kuspit's pronouncement may be somewhat extreme, but art critical writing is

crucial in the production field of art. It informs *and*, importantly, promotes through its text. Recently Kuspit took on the topic of the art market; he states:

> Many years ago Mayer Schapiro argued that there was a radical difference between art's spiritual value and its commercial value. He warned against the nihilistic effect of collapsing their difference. I will argue that today, in the public mind, and perhaps in the unconscious of many artists, there is no difference. The commercial value of art has usurped its spiritual value, indeed, seems to determine it. Art's esthetic, cognitive, emotional and moral value - its value for the dialectical varieties of critical consciousness – has been subsumed by the value of money.[31]

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[30] Malcolm Gee, "Twentieth-century Art Criticism, in *Art Criticism since 1900*, ed. Malcolm Gee (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1993), 19.
[31] Donald Kuspit, *Art Values or Market Values?* (March 06, 2007); available from http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/kuspit/kuspit3-6-07.asp; Internet.

artnet contributor Jerry Saltz, as previously noted, does not have an academic background in the arts. However, his engagement with and knowledge of the subject is evident in his writing. Saltz writes as a kind of "everyman." The language he uses is plain and intelligent and is easily accessible to the average interested reader. However, Saltz's approach is also able hold the interest of a more specialized reader. Reviewing the recent exhibition *What is Painting?* installed at New York's Museum of Modern Art from July 07 – September 17, 2007 Saltz wrote:

> More than a third of the show's artists are women, and it begins with Vija Celmins's 1964 salmon-and-grey rendition of a handgun being fired. Immediately you see that [curator] Umland isn't on the approved art-historical path – Abstract Expressionism to Johns - and – Rauschenberg to Pop and minimalism. In 1964, Celmins was already crossing Pop with Minimalism, photography, conceptual art, illustration, and what 20 years later would be call appropriation art. It's a hazy, mazy little picture, as fervid and flat-footed as it is clairvoyant.[32]

Saltz's often exuberant writing about art and the art world can be contagious; for example, in an essay on the state of contemporary curating with regards to the 2007 Venice Biennale, Documenta XII, and Sculpture Projects Münster he writes:

> The alchemy of good curating amounts to this: sometimes placing one work of art near another makes one and one equal three. Two artworks arranged alchemically leave each intact, transform both and create a third thing. This third thing *and* the two original things then trigger cascades of thought and reaction; you know things you didn't know you needed to know until you know them; then you can't imagine ever not knowing them again. Then these things transform all the other things and thoughts you've had. This chain-reaction is thrilling and uncanny.[33]

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[32] Jerry Saltz, *Back from the Brink*, (September 17, 2007); available from http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/saltz/saltz9-18-07.asp; Internet.
[33] Jerry Saltz, *The Alchemy of Curating*, (July 17, 2007); available from http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/saltz/saltz7-17-07.asp; Internet.

Charlie Finch has a background in political science and theology. In the early 1980's

Finch became involved with the East Village art scene and for a time ran a gallery called

Real Art. In 1992, Finch began writing for *Coagula*, a Los Angeles-based art 'zine

(magazine) that was as much fueled by its gossip and invective as it was by its

commentary and reviews. Recruited by Walter Robinson in 1997 to write a column for

artnet, Finch's writings can range from knowledgeable, witty and opinionated critique to

crude and venomous harangue. However, the difference between Charlie Finch's

occasional acid-tongue and Tyler Green's "snarks" is that Finch also writes honest,

thoughtful essays that exhibit depth and experience, as in the following excerpt from his

article on "looking:"

> Aaron Young's idiotic cyclespew [the performance piece *Greeting Card* in
> which motorcyclists create a "painting" with their bikes] at the uptown Armory...
> [of which] published reports were full of noise and smoke. [Installation artist]
> Rirkrit (Tiravanija, b 1961) made a jungle gym somewhere, lame-os stunk up
> Deitch Projects [a New York contemporary art gallery] with B.O. In sum, the
> art experience in New York continues to be one of narrative, as opposed to
> solitary looking, at least among the elites and their tourist victims. Looking is
> an act of innocence, contingent on spontaneity and surprise. It has often been
> followed by contemplative thought. But, for a long time, our art world has robbed
> looking of its wonder. Is there a more sinister and Puritanical slur than 'the male
> gaze' with its injunction to blind Oedipus Rex and his sons again and again?
> So much of the contemporary canon exists to annihilate looking: Warhol's single
> takes of kisses and sleep, Paul McCarthy's vomitoria, Richard Prince's masturbatory
> appropriations.[34]

Before moving on to the next website I have chosen to examine, I would like to give

an example of the diversity in writing style and language to be found on *artnet magazine*.

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[34] Charlie Finch, *Looking* (September 25, 2007); available from
http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/finch/finch9-25-07.asp; Internet.

In an *artnet* article reviewing and discussing a recent retrospective of German painter

Neo Rauch (b.1961) Donald Kuspit wrote the following: "Populist illustration and avant-

gardism are both profoundly modern, and Rauch makes postmodern use of both. He

struggles to reconcile them, but juxtaposes rather than synthesizes them, thus confirming

difference and even irreconcilability. But the formal absurdity underpins the emotional

absurdity that is Rauch's basic subject matter."[35] Of Rauch's 2005 *Renegaten* show in

New York, Jerry Saltz wrote more informally that Rauch's "museum-scaled paintings,

composed of major but outmoded styles, produce a kind of psycho-visual whiplash,

caroming between overwhelming physical power and spirit-numbing optical

monotony... although several of these paintings are stunning, I think they could be hard to

live with. They're grand, commanding and willful. Their subject matter feels oddly

alien, even irrelevant."[36] Finally, Charlie Finch, in a review of a Rosa Loy (Mrs. Neo

Rauch) gallery show, notes the lack of "arch sculptural clumsiness that characterizes the

paintings of Loy's spouse, Neo Rauch."[37]

The second website I chose to look at is *artsJournal*. My email to its editor

unfortunately went unanswered. *artsJournal* was founded in September of 1999 and

boasts an audience of 250,000 with 30,000 subscribers, and the audience for *artsJournal*,

says editor and founder Douglas McLennan, "consists of arts journalists, arts professionals

(curators, music administrators, even actual artists) and educated people from all walks of

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[35] Donald Kuspit, *The Truth About Germany?* (June 26, 2007, accessed September 12, 2007); available from http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/kuspit/kuspit6-26-07.asp; Internet.

[36] Jerry Saltz, *Reason Without Meaning.* (June 07, 2005, accessed September 12, 2007); available from http://www.artnet.com/magazine/features/jsaltz/saltz6-7-05.asp; Internet.

[37] Charlie Finch, *Babes in Loyland* (July 14, 2006; accessed September 12, 2007); available at http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/finch/finch7-14-06.asp; Internet.

life with an interest in the arts."[38] As previously noted, *artsJournal* is an aggregate site, constructed by culling art news from newspapers. North American sources include *The New York Times, Chicago Tribune, The Toronto Globe & Mail*, and from the United Kingdom *artsJournal* references newspapers such as *The London Times, The Guardian, The Art Newspaper. artsJournal* provides links to the articles it posts on the Home Page of its site.

This website covers a host of cultural and artistic news on subjects such as art, dance, music, theatre, museum practice, and architecture and is exemplary of Genette's notion of *architextuality*, wherein each of the aggregated texts links to the type of discourse it represents. There is a classified ad section and a job posting section on the site, as well as a daily video clip from the website *YouTube*, usually featuring a brief musical performance that can be contemporary or archival, classical or pop. The balance of the website is taken up by blogs covering the above-noted subjects which are sponsored by the site, such as Tyler Green's aforementioned *Modern Art Notes*, and that is where the art critical writing takes place on this site. The blogs are often but not always illustrated. Whereas *artnet* has its own differently-focused pages on its site, in essence, the framework of the *artsJournal* site is based on *links* to newspaper websites and weblogs, exemplary of the Derridian notion of *débordement*, the overrun of traditional boundaries wherein text becomes a differential network, a fabric of traces.

Having already discussed Green's blog in another context, I would like to turn to another example of an art writing on *artsJournal*. *Artopia* is the visual arts blog written

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[38] John Rockwell, "Conversing on the Arts by Clicking a Mouse," *New York Times*, July 09, 2003; accessed June 08, 2007; available from http://www.artsjournal.com/about/nytstory.html; Internet.

by John Perreault, (b.1937) who has been writing art criticism for many years, beginning

at *Art News* as a young man, then at the *Village Voice*, the *Soho News* and numerous

other publications. Perreault is also a painter, and his long experience as both an artist

and critic informs his critical prose, which is both casual and intelligent in nature. The

following is an example from his *artsJournal*-hosted blog: "A considerable part of

understanding sculpture is the perception one may have of how it has been made, what it

is made of, how it stands -- and, we shouldn't forget, what it took to get it here. These are

sculpture's primary subjects. Is this true too of painting? Less so, since every line, shape,

color is an illusion waiting to be denied."[39] Quite a different tone from Tyler Green's

blog and an indication of the countless different approaches to art writing on (and for) the

World Wide Web, as well as *artsJournal*.

Recently *artsJournal* hosted a group blog over a four-day period called "Critical

Edge: Critics in a Critical Age – an Online Debate May 14 -17, 2006." It was a

precursor to a four-day meeting to be held at the Philadelphia Museum of Art from May

18 – 21, 2006 where one full day was to be given over to a conference on the current state

of art journalism called "The New Playing Field." In his welcoming address to the online

debate, Douglas McLennan states that the number of traditional (print media) critics is

increasingly on the decline because of the availability and ease of access to information

and opinion provided by the Internet. McLennan goes on to say that we still need critics

to help us navigate that mass of cultural information: "Finding coherence and setting

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[39] John Perreault, *Artopia* (June 15, 2007; accessed September 12, 2007); available from http://www.artsjournal.com/artopia/; Internet.

context have long been central to the role of critic."[40] The question, he goes on to say, is what kind of cultural journalism do we want? Equally important, he asks *where* are the interesting debates on culture happening?

The first to respond to these opening remarks was Terry Teachout, who is a critic for the *Wall Street Journal* and maintains a blog on the *artsJournal* site called *About Last Night*. Teachout maintains that much of the best cultural commentary is provided by amateur artbloggers and that "middle-age print-media critics who want to be read in the age of Web-based journalism must start by recognizing that they're in direct competition with young bloggers. If they don't, they'll vanish – and most of them will deserve their fate…the only way for critics to 'earn their authority' in the age of new media is to be *interesting*. Nothing less is good enough."[41]

This is not to say that there are not problems with some print media criticism, including for example the previously noted tendency towards description rather than informed opinion and judgment. However, publishing in the print media has the advantages of the editing process as well as the publication's standards and concerns with accuracy and equanimity. Artblogging gives amateur critics a platform through which other like-minded sorts can read and respond, and of course some of the writing is very good and very interesting. Teachout goes on to say that "If I were a newspaper editor, I'd be looking to the blogs for the next generation of critics. What's more, I'd not only

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[40] Douglas McLennan, *Critical Edge: Critics in a Critical Age – an Online Debate May 14 -17, 2006*, accessed July 01, 2007; available from http://www.artsjournal.com/ajblog/2006/05/nothing_here_yet.html; Internet.
[41] Terry Teachout, *Up Against It*, accessed July 01, 2007; available from http://www.artsjournal.com/ajblog/2006/05/nothing_here_yet.html; Internet.

encourage but expect my new young guns to transfer their blogs to my newspaper's Web site, complete with snark and comments and four-letter words."[42] While those elements can be entertaining and aid in getting context or a point across to the reader, most often they add nothing of significant value to the piece. Teachout seems to think that sarcasm and cursing are an integral part of artblogging, but often such commentary makes the author appear as adolescent, hardly making it responsible or interesting art critical writing.

The film critic Richard Schickel echoed similar concerns when he recently responded to a *New York Times* article about the decline in the number of book reviews in newspapers and the increase of literary critical blogs; his commentary in the article applies to the field of criticism at large and so, like the previous example, has consequences for art writing. Schickel quotes the *Times* article, which stated: "Some publishers and literary bloggers...viewed this development contentedly as an inevitable transition toward a new, more democratic literary landscape where anyone can comment on books."[43] He takes umbrage with this and writes: "criticism – and its humble cousin, reviewing – is not a democratic activity. It is, or should be, an elite enterprise, ideally undertaken by individuals who bring something to the party beyond their hasty instinctive opinion of a book (or any other cultural object.)"[44] His concerns are ones that are familiar in this debate; for hallmarks of good criticism are familiarity with the artist's

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[42] Teachout.

[43] Richard Schickel, *Not Everybody's a Critic*, May 20, 2007 (accessed July 01, 2007); available from http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/la-op-schickel20may20,0,7430993.story?coll=la-opinion-rightrail; Internet.

[44] Schickel.

work, theoretical and historical knowledge, and taste in order to make an informed and

considered opinion. However, I must disagree with his use of the word "elite;" it is this

type of stance that helps to perpetuate the combative posturings of art bloggers such as

Tyler Green. Conversely, Schickel does go on to state that he doesn't think "that it is

impossible for bloggers to write intelligent reviews...I do think that a simple 'love' of

reading is an insufficient qualification for the job."[45] The same could be said for lovers

of art who use that as the primary justification of their own blogs.

The third and final site that I am looking at, *Haber's Art Reviews*, combines John

Haber's interest in art and his concern for postmodern and feminist theories in reviews

and essays that are thoughtful and intelligent. Haber started writing online in 1994,

before the term "blogging" was in the common vernacular; he in fact refers to his site as a

"Webzine." He states that he began writing online for the opposite reason most people

have in creating their own blog: "I wanted space you don't get in a newspaper review, to

reach a general reader while giving more than thumbs up/thumbs down, a more truly

informed criticism."[46] In addition to his academic background and editorial expertise,

Haber also possesses considerable computer and multimedia expertise. The art writing

and criticism on this site covers a broad range of exhibitions and topics, for example, a

review of an exhibition called *Headlines*, held in New Jersey in July 2006. The

seventeen artists in the show looked at the ways in which the media respond to headline

news. Haber begins his review thus:

> Art always serves public and private purposes, which is precisely why it can speak
> to personal and political issues today... these often crossed purposes include not just

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[45] Schickel.

[46] Author's correspondence with John Haber, April 02, 2007.

artist and patron—or artist and the government. Creative expression also relies on media, styles, images, and meanings that the artist, the critic, and you, too, have a share in deciding. Art, then, always enters a context of understandings and misunderstandings. That context gets messy, for today art serves multiple, increasingly polarized audiences — and sometimes that means anger all around. Art itself can help elucidate the conflict, because it helps to describe and also to shape how people understand themselves.[47]

When discussing the various works in this exhibition, Haber writes that "A. J. Bocchino rips (the headlines) *out* of the paper, for a digital collage in strict chronological order...Bocchino's color coding of news items does not really work either as a deconstruction of media priorities or as abstraction."[48] Accompanying this review were two visuals from the exhibition; one of artist Curt Iken's easy chairs constructed out of shredded newspaper print and the other a photograph of a "sculpture" by Carlo Vialu – flowers planted in the shape of an AK-47 assault rifle, reflecting Haber's words from the beginning of his review. Clearly not your average art blogger, Haber sets up a context for viewing the show and goes on to display notions of theory, judgment and quality.

In a February 2007 review of a Kiki Smith retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art Haber writes:

[Smith's] work has an essentialist view of the human condition... with a women's suffering and nurturing as the essence. In an(other) early work, a naked woman's outstretched arms stick to the wall, as if crucified, but one remembers just as much the long hair that hides her bowed head. These emblems of human nature belong at once to the body and to myth, which for her never give way, not even when they die. Her reach for eternity, the richness of her imagery, and the fineness of her materials account for much of her resonance. Her theme of physical encounters also connects to art's fascination with installation and sensual overload, while her love of old images connects to a shift from formalism to theater. Like [Eva] Hesse, she created her own definition for a feminist art just when others were forging theirs as well.[49]

It is this kind of writing that makes John Haber's writings and reviews both knowledgeable and reflective. There is only one reproduction accompanying this review

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[47] John Haber, *Vandalizing Headlines* (July 2006, accessed September 16, 2007); available at http://www.haberarts.com/pierro2.htm; Internet.

[48] Haber.

[49] John Haber, *A Gathering Storm* (February 2007, accessed September 16, 2007); available at http://www.haberarts.com/ksmith.htm; Internet.

– Smith's male and female wax figures from 1990 *Untitled* - and in this way, Haber's blog parallels the structure of a newspaper or journal article. In contrast, articles on a website such as *artnet Magazine* are often heavily illustrated, showing up to six reproductions of an artist's work. This is a further example of the diversity of art writing websites, particularly their paratextual elements.

In response to my question, "In what ways do you think writing art criticism for the Web has changed the practice and reception of it?" Haber replied: "The differences you seek are a work in progress. The Web had led to large changes in many publishing disciplines."[50] He states that mainstream publications have had to create websites to compete with the Internet; ironically, this gives them further advertising support while concurrently burdening the future of print media. In the art world specifically, Haber posits that genre magazines are going online primarily for adjunct blogs, but notes that "The shallowness of blogs stands out more in a field that privileges interpretation, like art, than in one that privileges argument, like politics…"[51]

Furthermore, the notion of "interplay" between author and reader on the Internet has not been exploited to its fullest potential, according to Haber's experience of his own site. Mr. Haber wrote to me that "The feedback I've received doesn't suggest the huge change you'd expect, either. Students ask with help with homework, because they don't find what they need online (or are too lazy), and I end up having to tell them there are still libraries. People with a painting in the attic write, and I tell them to take it to a

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[50] Author's correspondence with John Haber, April 02, 2007.
[51] Author's correspondence with John Haber, April 02, 2007.

reputable dealer"[52]

Similarly, artists and dealers will write to Haber, asking for reviews of their work on their websites. While Haber will look at every link, he "can't review a Web site rather than work I and others will have been able to see in person (because art deserves that, because I have to write about what other people will want to see...).[53] On *Haber Art Reviews*, he writes for people who are active online and who "don't consider artspeak English."[54] That is to say, Haber does not write for the New York art scene's cognoscente. The home page on this site takes you directly to his most recent review of gallery and museum shows around New York. Through the web site's menu, one can choose to browse *Haber's Art Reviews* by an artist's or critic's name; what then appears is a short blurb on the artist with hypertextual links to Haber's previous writings about them.

Another menu option is *Art's Histories*; click on a period in art history that has been mapped out on this web page, and this takes to you a listing of artists names within that period, again with a hyperlink inserted to take you to Haber's previous writings relevant to them. In addition, the *Pick a Theme* page arranges Haber's reviews and essays around topics and ideas such as postmodernism, critical practice, feminism, and new media. Another page will take you to what Haber calls his *Greatest Hits*, essays that range in topic from Old Masters to art at the site of the former World Trade Center. On the website's page titled *Haber's Art Resources* is a list of museums and galleries that he

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[52] Author's correspondence with John Haber, April 02, 2007.
[53] Author's correspondence with John Haber, April 02, 2007.
[54] John Haber, *Haber's Art Reviews* (accessed July 07, 2007); available from http://www.haberarts.com/preface.htm; Internet.

has cited in his online writings and includes their addresses, opening hours, and a brief take on that institution's web site. Print sources and web sites that are some of Haber's favourite sources are listed for consultation. It is interesting to contrast the paratextual elements of *Haber's Art Reviews* with those of *artnet*, which function to sell rather than to inform.

The *Who Am I?* page lists the "bare facts" about Haber and has many intertextual hyperlinks to items such as his resumé and various personal short stories; another hyperlink on this page leads to a longer, more poignant biography. The hyperlinks also serve as paratextual elements in that the information they provide adds to the framing of the text of the web site itself. There is the peritextual element of the menu, much in the way in which a table of contents in a printed volume is itself a peritextual element. Examples of epitextual elements on the web site are Haber's biography and several essays recounting personal experiences; they are outside the "text," not part of the purpose of this site, yet knowledge of them mediates our reception of Haber's reviews.

John Haber states that one aim of his on line reviews is to "argue for art in a postmodern culture...I do not have to stop at detachment: I can describe *and* philosophize."[55] He also notes that his writing is "shaped by the demand of an on-line medium: I give every reader a chance."[56] Haber tries to keep his sentences short and precise, and edits out as much jargon or artspeak in his reviews as he can while retaining the degree of complexity he feels is a necessary component of good criticism. John Haber takes Arthur Danto as his model and admires how much Danto can "get" into a

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[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.

single review – description, judgment, philosophic musings, his search for "meaning" in a painting, often comparing and contrasting another artist, or art and non-art.

Haber's own critical writings and essays are perhaps less formal than those that can be found in the art magazines, however they provide much more than a blog. It is apparent that John Haber wants his readers to "have access" to art by the *Pick a Theme* and *Art's Histories* pages on this site. While no means comprehensive, the pages provide easily read nuggets on artists or critical theory within the context of this site. What is also important for Haber is his desire to share his passion and inquisitiveness about art with those who have an interest, while hopefully sparking the same in others on the World Wide Web. His participation on the World Wide Web has much of the same concerns as more sophisticated and knowledgeable art writing available in the print media. However, by capitalizing on the organic nature of the Internet, he is able to go beyond print critics and demonstrate the positive potential of on-line art criticism.

The true critic is he who bears within himself the dreams and ideas and feelings of myriad generations, and to whom no form of thought is alien, no emotional impulse obscure.[1]

CONCLUSION

The medium of the World Wide Web has altered the nature of contemporary art criticism from what was once the purview of a specialized field of professional writing to an open arena for a broad spectrum of the population. The Web provides a forum for the exchange of ideas and opinions and helps to create a profusion of dialogues on art. Conversely, the message of this medium becomes problematic when, regardless of credentials, education, or experience, opinions posted on the Web are digested as fact and "snarking" is read as informed criticism. This dichotomy reflects the contradictory nature inherent in contemporary cultural production.

There is much pontificating on the World Wide Web regarding print media, art criticism and writing, the gist of which is "all art blogs are exercises in democracy, all print media art critical writing is elitist and archaic." However, just as all traditional media art critics are not created equal, the same is true of art blogs, which range from thoughtful and insightful to studies in character assassination. The mediums of print based and ether-based art critical writing do share further commonalities such as the debate of objectivity versus subjectivity; similarly both media can be and are on occasion used to promote a particular artist or critical ideology.

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[1] Oscar Wilde, "The Critic as Artist," in *Collected Works of Oscar Wilde*, (London: Wordsworth Editions, 1997), 854.

Therefore what can be said about the current state of art criticism and art writing in the age of hypertext? Certainly the medium of the Internet has allowed greater access to those who wish to "publish" their art writings, amateur and professional alike. And are today's art blogs really all that different from the often anonymous *feuilleton* of Diderot's age, or from some of the content in the *philosophe's* own Salon writings? Indeed, there are some similarities (sharp tongues come to mind); but it is unlikely that today's blogs will stand the test of time in the way that Diderot's template for modern art critical writing retains our interest because of the quality of his writing.

Clement Greenberg and Donald Kuspit share a conviction that modernism was the aesthetic apex of art. Although Greenberg was great admirer of Baudelaire, the *poète maudit's* belief in the necessity of the modern lived experience as an essential component of contemporary art criticism did not find its way into Greenberg's art writings, as it did in that of Arthur Danto. Greenberg could not bring himself to truly write about and engage with most art after Abstract Expressionism; yet Donald Kuspit's art critical writings for *artnet* touch on a wide range of art and artists as well as art ideological and theoretical concerns mirroring the multiple layers that comprise the ever-shifting discourse of art writing and criticism. Kuspit's notion of "post-art" as a contemporary condition wherein postmodernism has succeeded in collapsing so many boundaries, so that art is no longer its own category and has become unimaginative and shallow interestingly echoes the concerns of Diderot and Baudelaire in their own times.

Arthur Danto and John Haber share many of the same concerns and approach to their art critical writing. For example, both take great consideration of their readers when

writing art criticism. Their texts are inclusive and directed at a broad audience whom both critics treat as intelligent readers. Reviews and articles are comprised of a range of elements, such as various artistic and literary theories, common and personal experience or metaphysical musings, and all written in a highly accessible manner.

The age of the World Wide Web not only gives global access to art criticism and writing on-line, but importantly a wealth of images. Diderot's access to images consisted mainly of his attendance at the Salons - he was obliged to see new works *in situ*; Baudelaire had the Salons as well as access to printed reproductions. Clement Greenberg's visual resources included art journals and colour reproductions as well as a great degree of access to many artist's studios. Today, art writers such as Arthur Danto can include the archive of the Internet as a source for images.

The Salons of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were enormous annual venues in which a large number of artists could exhibit their work to a much greater audience than they would normally have access to, and in this we can find a parallel with the World Wide Web. In fact, during the course of my research for this thesis, I came across many art bloggers whose *cri de coeur* heralded the Internet as one big gallery where anyone can show anything, proving that the Web is more egalitarian than the print media and suggesting a "good riddance" to professional critics.

Irrespective of some postmodernist tendencies, not just anything is art; similarly, the act of posting commentary and opinion on an art writing weblog does not necessarily make it art criticism. That is not to say that there are not numerous sites of legitimate art

critical discourse on the Internet, for there are. But good art criticism must be informed;
it requires deep knowledge of its subject, art historical knowledge, theory, and a certain
intuition that is largely informed by these elements. More importantly it requires long
experience of the actual objects and the understanding that is gained by dedicated
looking. Good art criticism also necessitates the articulate and judicious use of language
that is often lacking on art weblogs.

It is ultimately the responsibility of the reader to intelligently navigate through the
maze of art critical web sites and blogs on the Internet, and while this is also the case
with print-based media, the World Wide Web provides a labyrinth of texts and authors
previously unimagined by the average reader. Regarding art criticism and writing on the
Web, the audience must be able to discern thoughtful analysis from superficial judgment
if the reader has intellectual standards. A further complication to Internet-based art
critical writing is that the hypertextual nature of the medium has brought the roles of
author and reader much closer together than the medium of print, so that its effect is
often one of a blurring of boundaries between the two functions.

An additional obstacle to Web-based publishing is the transient nature of hypertext-
based technology. In my research for this thesis several art blogs and websites I visited a
year ago no longer exist or are no longer accessible, vanished into the ether because of
broken links or lack of site maintenance. The implications of such impermanence
challenges those who believe that print-based media has become obsolete and that the
World Wide Web has become the ultimate art writing archive. The impact on future art

historical study of art criticism of today is obvious and there is no way to ensure what will be lost or what will be saved, in contrast to print media.

Extrapolating from Roland Barthes, we are in a sense already hypertextual beings, sites created by a multiplicity of discourses. Added to this is the notion that in our technology-based society, the computer keyboard becomes a technological extension of our physical selves. Marshall McLuhan posited that for every extension of our physical selves, there is a corresponding amputation. What is the amputation with regards to art criticism on the World Wide Web? Perhaps the faculty of discrimination. The amount of information and opinion on the Internet is overwhelming; web-surfing often leads to intellectual overload and the virtual experience of Derrida's notion of *débordement*.

And so, has hypertext diminished the authority of art critical writing? I would conclude that if it has, it is only to the extent to which hypertext has diminished the authority of any other subject discussed on the World Wide Web. Specifically, I did not find any evidence that the medium has diminished the authority of *good* art critical writing. Hypertext and the Internet are not the end of art criticism. They are only the end of art criticism in so far as Arthur Danto appropriated Frederic Jameson in declaring the end of art: the delivery system of art criticism has changed. Art critical writing now operates on a global basis through the medium of the World Wide Web. Inevitably, this expands the genre's potential for pitfalls, but more importantly the medium also expands art criticism's potential to engage a borderless audience.

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Figure 1. Van Loo, Louis-Michel 1707-1771. *Portrait of Denis Diderot*, 1767. Oil on canvas, 81 x 65 cm. Musée National du Louvre, Paris.

Figure 2. Greuze, Jean-Baptiste, French, 1725-1805. *Filial Piety: The Benefits of a Good Education*, 1763. Oil on canvas, 115 x 146 cm. The Hermitage, St. Petersburg, Russia.
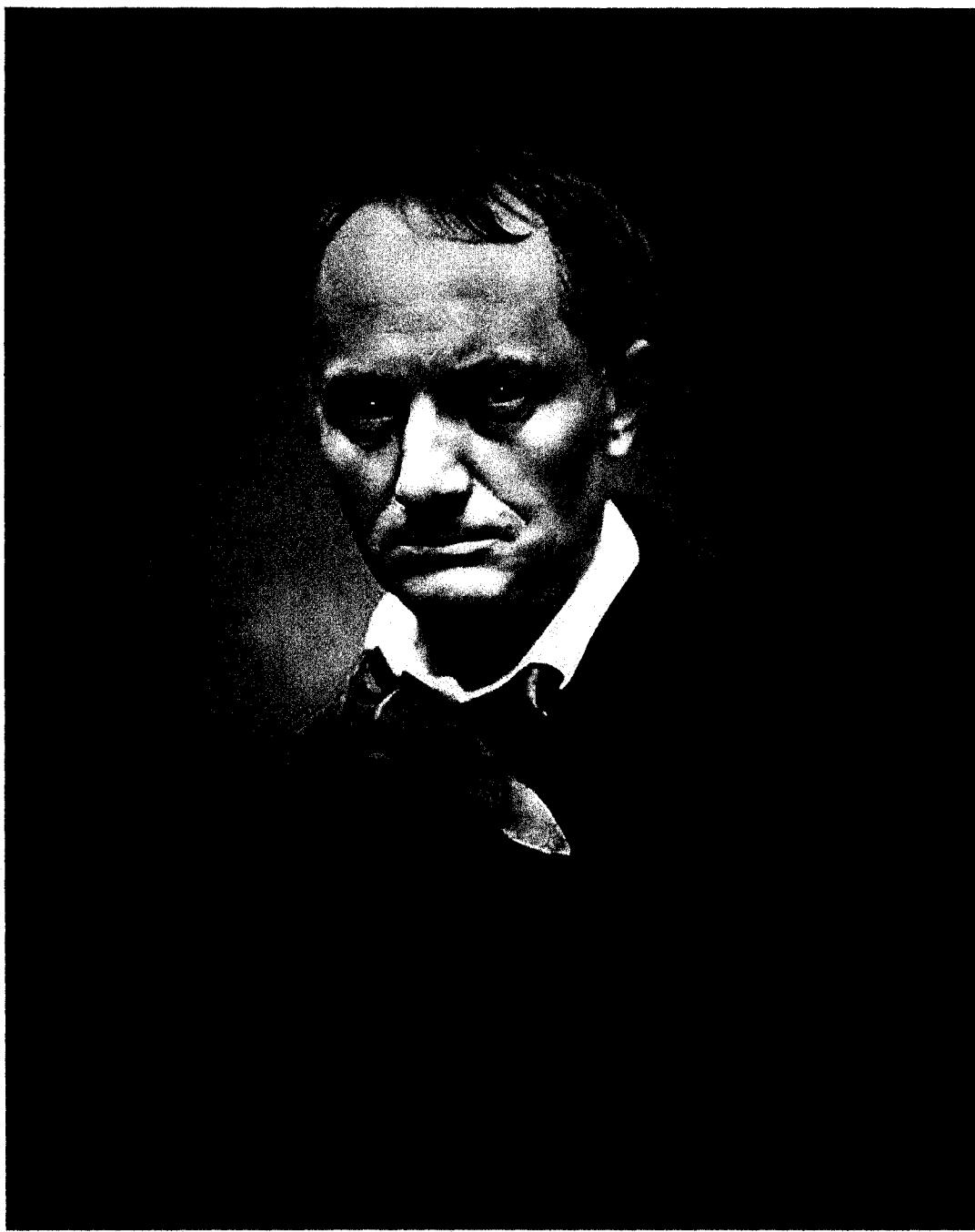
Figure 3. Carjat, Etienne, French, 1828-1863. *Charles Baudeliare*, c.1863. Plate from Galerie Contemporain, Paris, 1870.

Figure 4. Constantin Guys, French, 1802-1892. *Les Champs Élysées, Paris*, mid 19th c. Musée du Petit Palais, Paris.
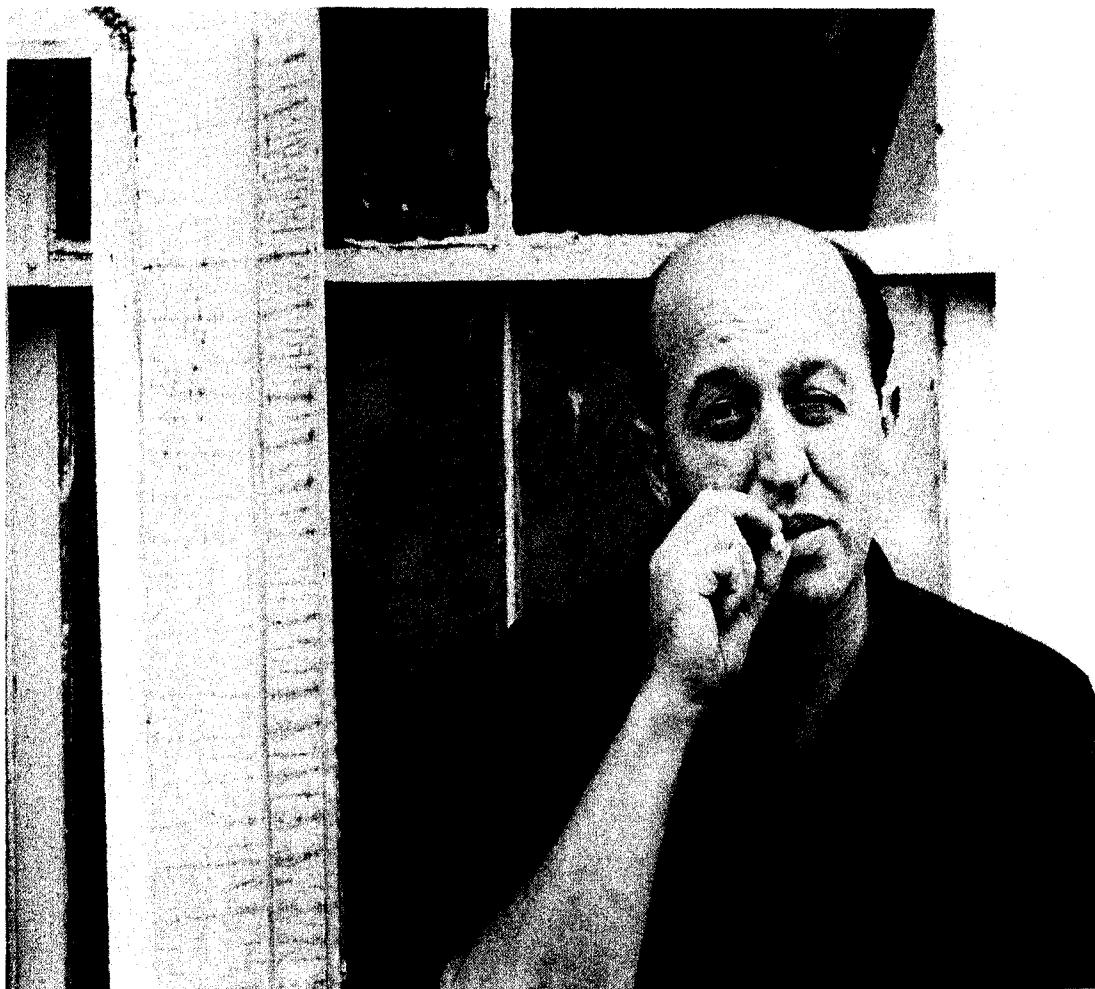
Figure 5. Hans Namuth, 1915-1990. *Clement Greenberg standing outside Jackson Pollock's studio*, 1951. Gelatin silver print.
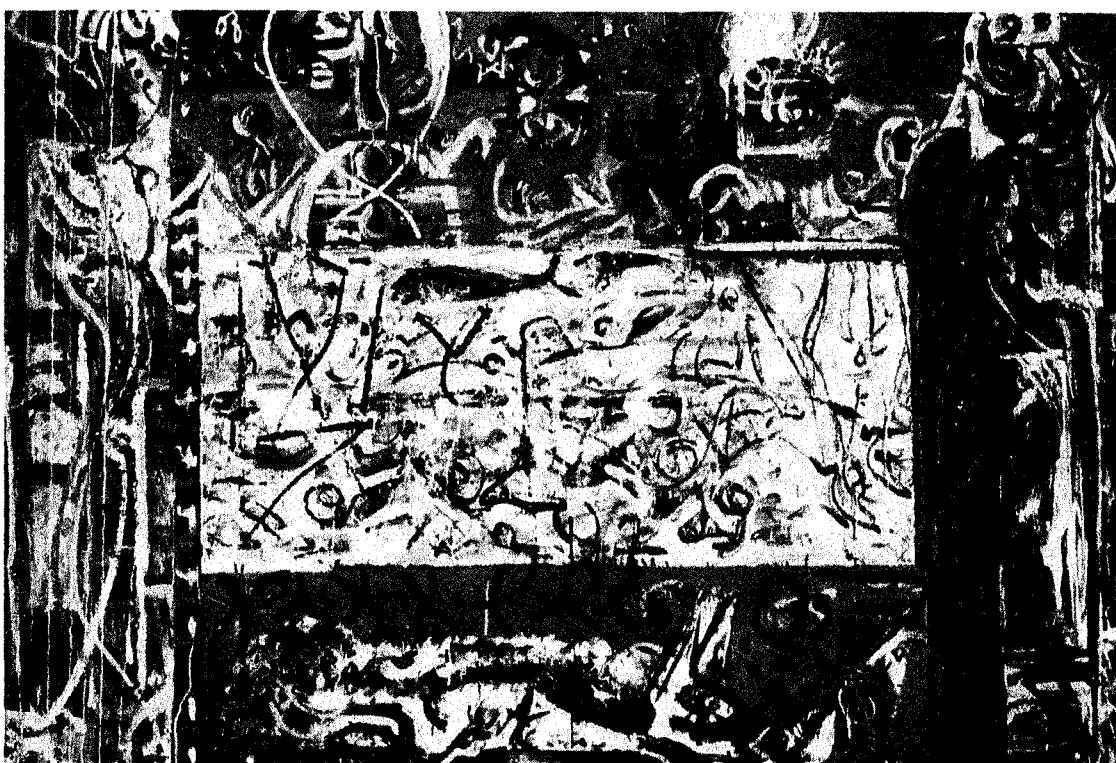
Figure 6. Jackson Pollock, 1912-1956. *Guardians of the Secret*, 1943. Oil on canvas, 48 x 75 ¼ in. San Francisco Museum of Art.
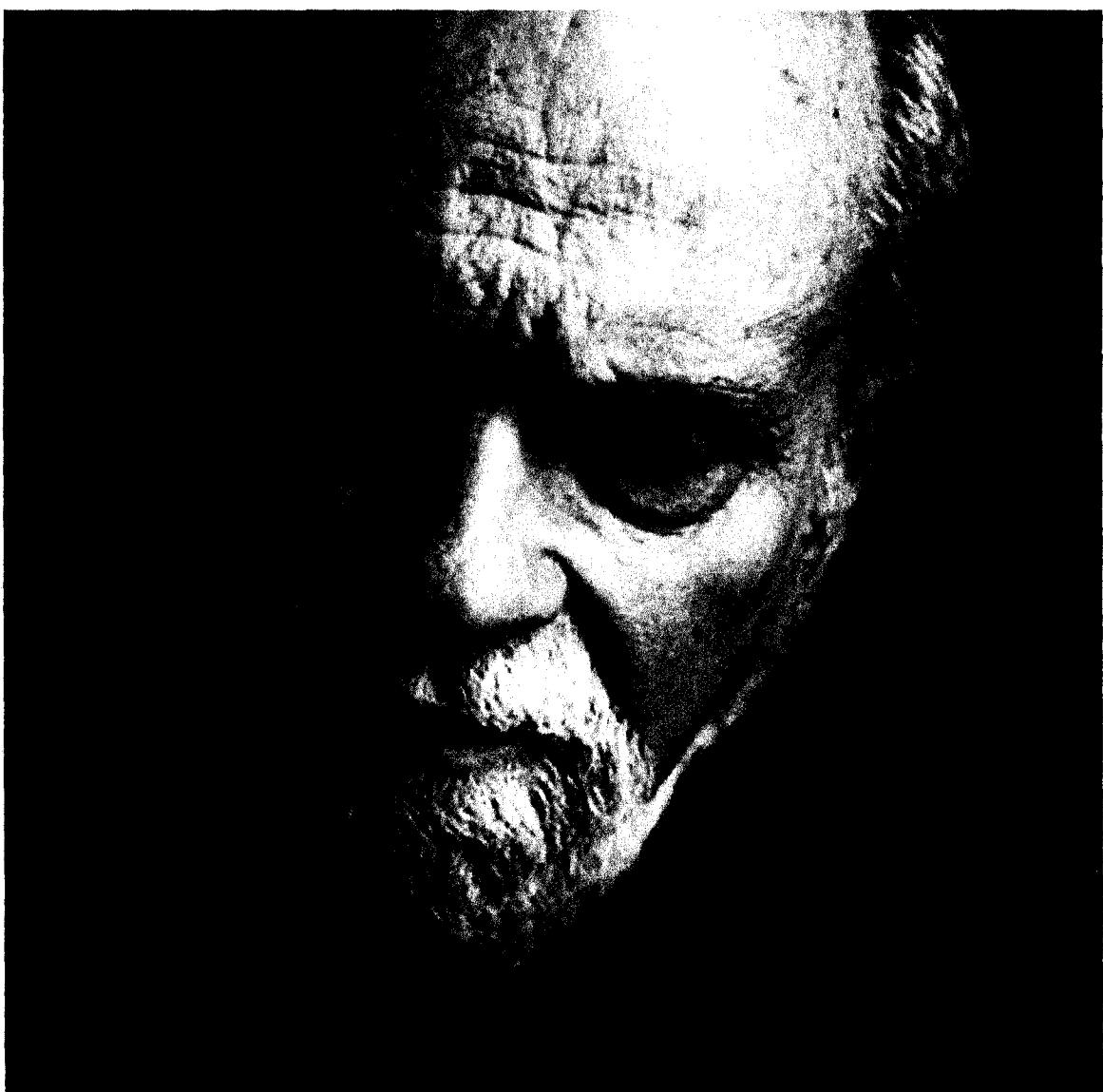
Figure 7. Steve Pyke, 1957-, *Arthur Danto, March 24, 2003*.
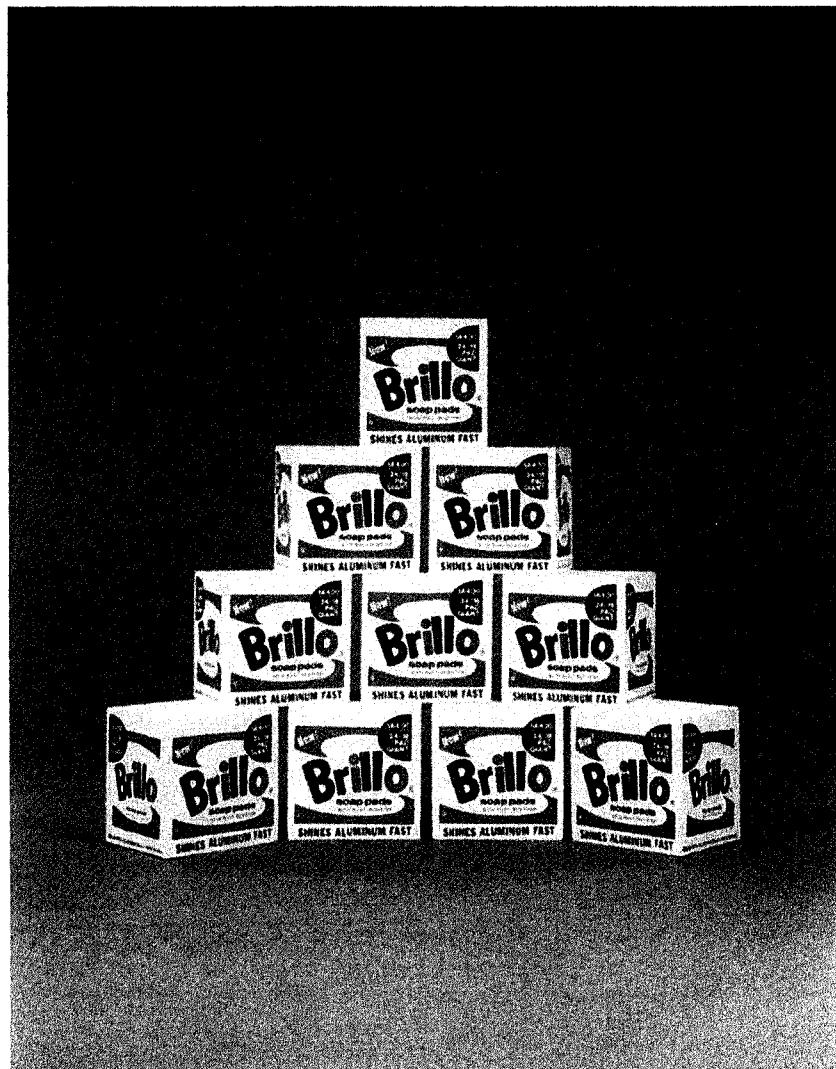
Figure 8. Andy Warhol, American, 1928-1987. *Brillo Boxes*, 1968.
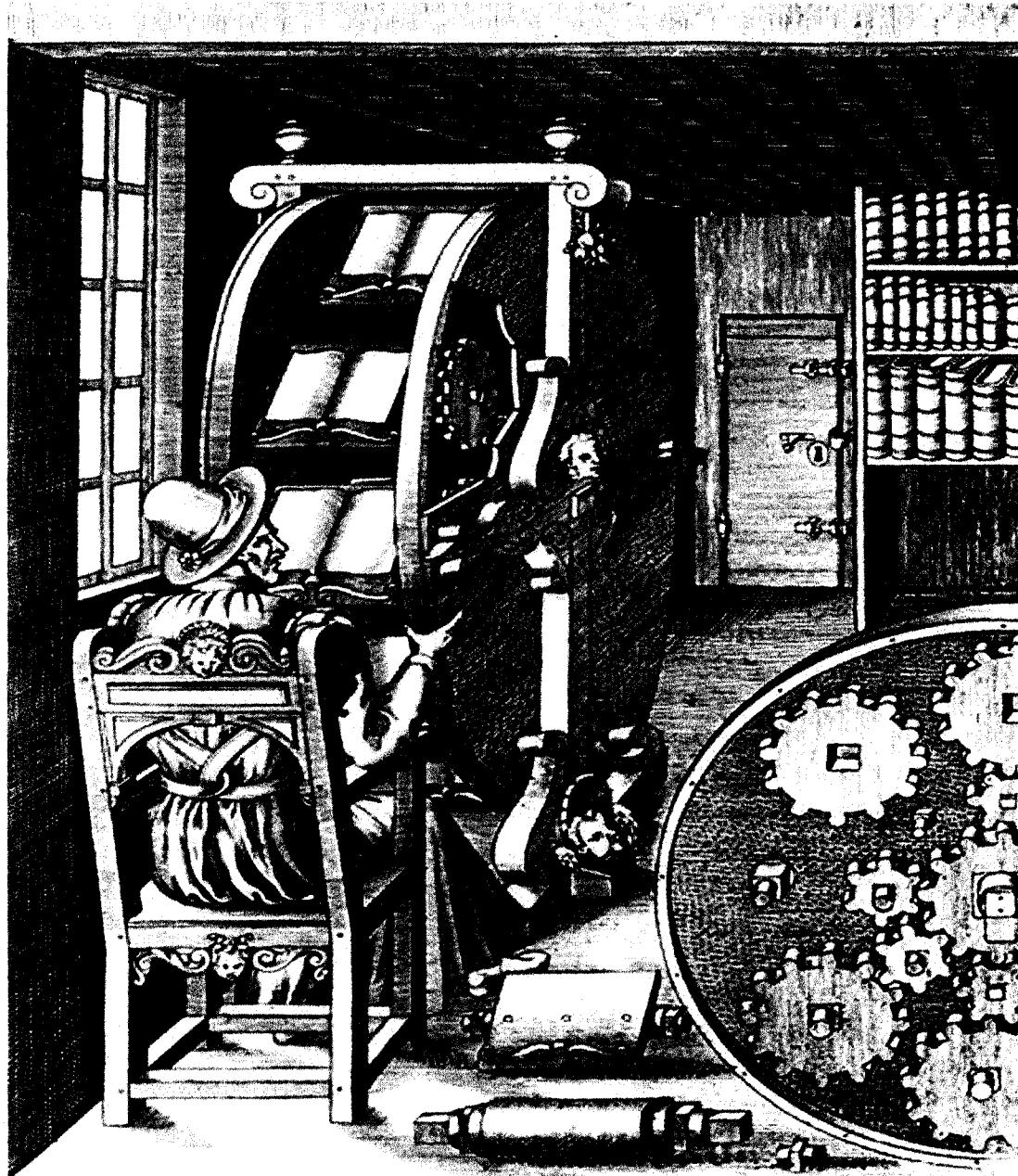
Figure 9. "Reading Wheel" illustration from *Le diverse et artificioise machines de Capitano Agostino Ramelli*, Paris, 1588.

Consider a future device for individual use....
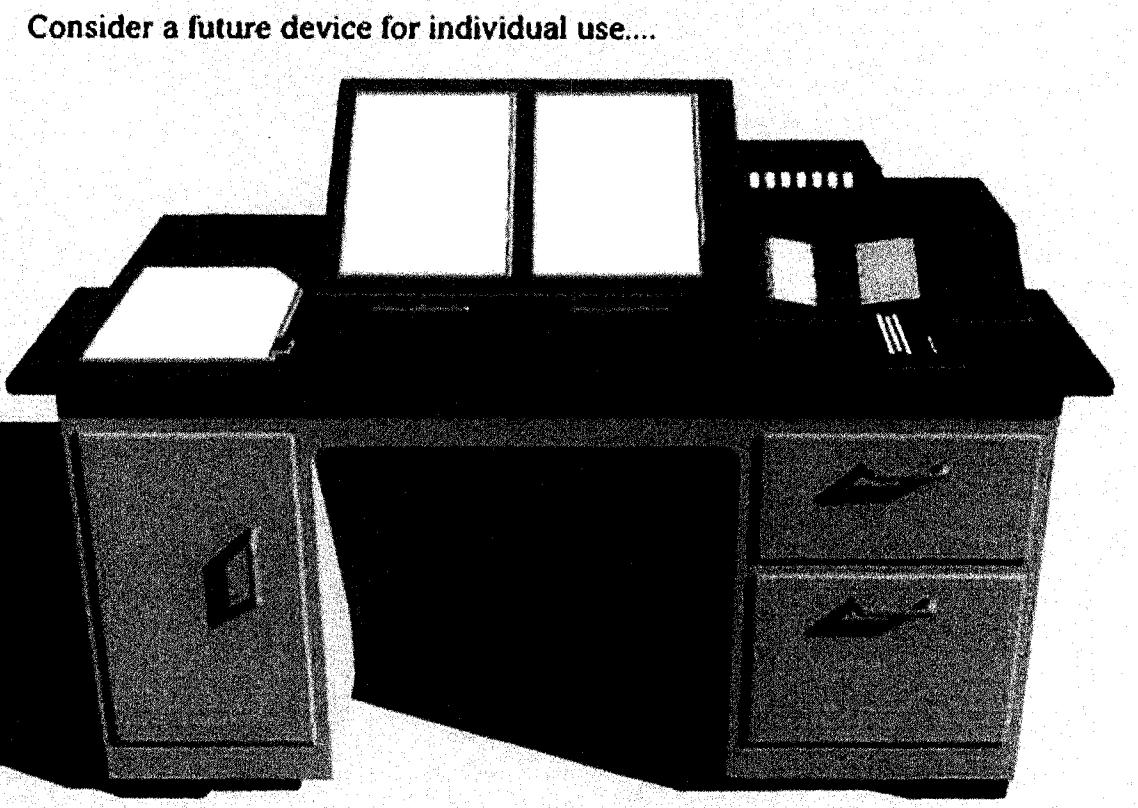
Figure 10. *Memex.* Artist's illustration; exterior view.
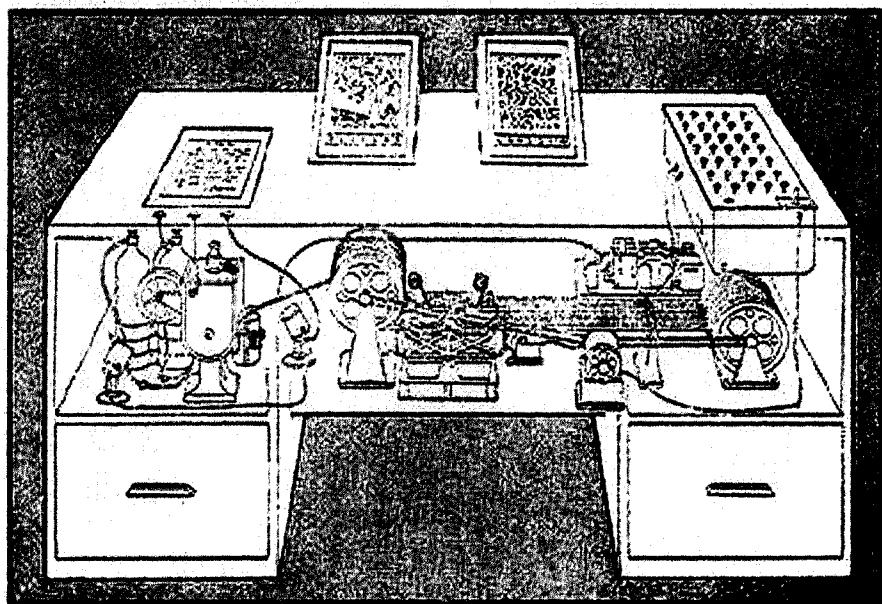
Memex in the form of a desk would instantly bring files and material on any subject to the operator's fingertips. Slanting translucent viewing screens magnify supermicrofilm filed by code numbers. At left is a mechanism which automatically photographs longhand notes, pictures and letters, then files them in the desk for future reference (*LIFE* 19(11), p. 123).

Figure 11. Memex. Artist's illustration, interior view. *Life Magazine*, September 1945.
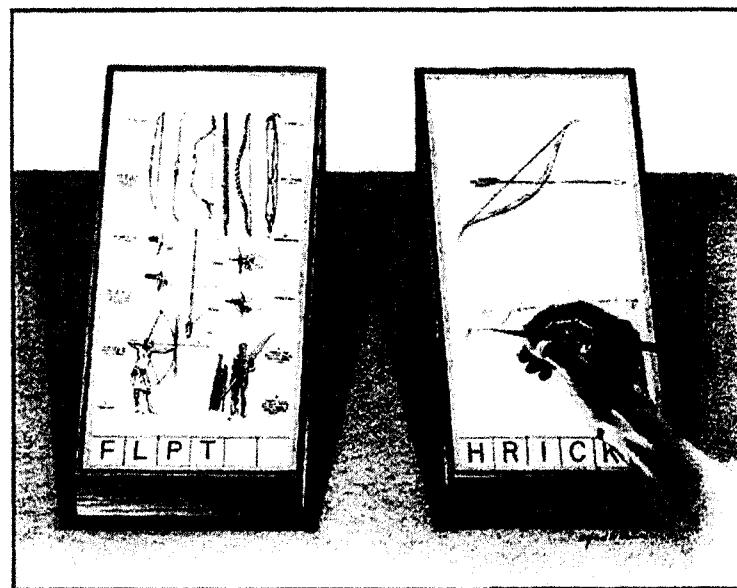
Memex in use is shown here. On one transparent screen the operator of the future writes notes and commentary dealing with reference material which is projected on the screen at left. Insertion of the proper code symbols at the bottom of right-hand screen will tie the new item to the earlier one after notes are photographed on supermicrofilm (*LIFE 19*(11), p. 124).

Figure 12. Memex in use. Artist's illustration, *Life Magazine*, September 1945.

Figure 13. Web site home page of *artnet Magazine*, November 05, 2007.

Figure 14. Excerpt from website home page of *artsJournal*, November 04, 2007.

Postmodernism and art history

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11.3.07 —
SCREEN TESTS

When artists think they can blend art and science, they are usually right, just not in the way they think. Sure, they can take science for subject matter, inspiration, or knowledge of materials and techniques. In fact, they can hardly help

NEW: Fall Updates

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Walker romances history,
Magritte seduces, Chelsea
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it. They also necessarily share with science an exploration of reality, external or not. They can easily fool themselves, though, into mistaking the style of scientific illustration for a greater representational truth. They are hardly producing good science—or even good art.

Then again, who can resist trying? Everyone these days has to cope with the authority authority of science—and not just those working in new media. When Jaq Chartier uses inks, dyes, and chemicals, she seeks correspondences between doing science, the process of art, and the unfolding of an organism. Still, her "Color Tests," at Schroeder Romero through November 24, would not look so appealing without the rich colors of her water-soluble media. They would not look so spooky, either, if one could not imagine one's DNA as determining one's fate, whether genetically or in a future police state.

Figure 15. Excerpt from website home page of *Haber's Art Reviews,* November 04, 2007.