ARTFORUM

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CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

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Indiana's art writing for the *Voice* had a gorgeous, chic nihilism just below its shimmering surface. For three years, his adjectivally sequined essays simultaneously caught and refracted the variable lighting of the art world in its halcyon '80s autumn. Most of the time, Indiana made it all seem like a careless, tipsy salon—the world as an overturned wine glass spinning and spilling madly over a table set for a gluttonous buffet.

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seemed to have parents, or a past more distant than last night's swell party, or a future beyond the swell party this evening and the disillusioned book he would write tomorrow." There was in Indiana's column a consistent self-awareness of possessing insider information. He was no nun of art, assiduously avoiding those he chronicled. No, Indiana wrote with a real delight, and occasionally a horror, in being exactly where he wanted to be —dead center—in the community he had temporarily adopted. Being there led to problems (things could get way too personal) but it also kept the essays bristlingly alive (about the art and the artists who made it). Often, his colleagues' and competitors' assessments of the same material felt as if they were telegraphed in from a chautauqua circuit where culture was a placebo, not a goad.

In Indiana's '80s, for a megasecond, artists and writers and curators and dealers and collectors could all experience the delirious, cardiac anxiety of, say, Alexander Haig's maniacal lunge for commander-in-chief after the assassination attempt on Ronald Reagan. Indiana always knew the '80s art world was a sham, but he kept the wind at his back and caught the current and, as often as not, soared. Still, read closely, the work of his last year was animated by an awful, weary loathing. Indiana was caught between loving the light that played on the iceberg and knowing full well that the iceberg was tearing apart the boat on which he sailed.

—RICHARD FLOOD

To tell you the truth, I've avoided any prolonged retrospective glance at my art-writing career since it ended. I fell into art criticism late in 1983 and jumped out of it in 1988, and my subsequent lack of engagement with the art world has been more or less total—a catalogue here and there when it's something I really do get hot for, but otherwise, silence. Several efforts have been made to collect my writings from that period, all instigated from outside, and I have always had mixed feelings about these efforts, mainly because other people seem to like that work more than I do. When I washed my hands of the art scene, I experienced a long period of revulsion against the little-big world I'd charted in its years of maximum exacerbation. Its present lack of frenzy has given that faraway time an improbable quality, like a long fever that finally dips to a stable temperature. I am no longer revulsed, but living on the other side of things.

Anyway, that career, which I always regarded as temporary, divides into two periods: first the end of ’83 and the entirety of ’84, when I wrote several long essays for *Art in America*, mainly on artists of the ’50s, ’60s, and earlier; and then March 1985 to I think June of 1988, when I wrote almost every week, in sickness and in health, for *The Village Voice*.

In the *Art in America* period I developed a fluency of critical vocabulary. I was not an art historian but I have always been a quick study, and the perusal of several art magazines convinced me that I could think as well as, and certainly write better than, the art critics working at the time. These writers often had something urgent to say, but were not always able to formulate it in transparent language. I view that as a writerly failing rather than an achievement. Not that what one has to say has to be simple, but people will read you more willingly if they understand you. Writers who don’t want to be understood are deluded fakes, or just bad writers.

In the years I’d been hanging around artists, I’d soaked up their concerns without knowing it; and of course I shared their temperament, since my main interests were in the theater, in writing fiction, and to a lesser extent in working on movies. So I was often able to figure out what an artist was up to, and to give it language. I was, or could be at times, a Method actor critic.

Incidentally, I had to *live* on the meager income from those early days. I did not have a trust fund, and I was rather tardy in discovering that most of the people I knew did. If I was prolific, it was because I needed the money, and lacked the agility at careerism that many writers my age parlayed into high-paying magazine jobs, screenwriting jobs, etc. That’s just a talent I lacked, and one that I’m still trying to cultivate in early middle age.

At the time, it was rather fun to make money writing about art. When I was offered Roberta Smith’s job at *The Village Voice*, New York’s “alternative” weekly newspaper, that looked like it might be fun too. I didn’t think it would last; neither did anyone else. It lasted about a year longer than I wanted it to.

One thing that immediately bothered me, and that no advice could have prepared me for, was the fact that I almost always had to write about “the new,” which, at the time, practically every artist in New York was desperate to establish him- or herself as. Between 1985 and 1988 there

were fortunes to he made out of a rather narrow band of collectors eager to snap things up at bargain prices, to get in on the ground floor, etc. I met these collectors and was amazed by their craving for novelty—they seemed to be constantly scouring artists' lofts and galleries, and throwing lavish dinner parties. How did they have the time to make money? The art world felt to me like a hot-air balloon that would eventually burst. I said that once at a symposium and was instantly accused of wishing people ill. I didn't wish anyone ill, but I did get a little nauseous watching certain people inflate. I think in the '80s one constantly sensed the blind side of inexorable historical forces: the insensible need, for instance, for one or two artists to be "great," to represent their era, to have their moments of glory consolidated into permanence by the vast institutional machinery of museums. (I especially distrusted Museum People, the worst-of-the-worst bureaucrats and nonentities—except when they weren't.) The artists that got picked may in the end have been perfectly appropriate, but I thought this reflected the shittiness of the period more than any "greatness."

Because the *Voice* and the *New York Times* ran the only reviews that appeared while shows were still hanging, each had an unseemly amount of power—the power to make people talk about specific artists, shows, galleries. This talk would steer the money to a particular location. I worked hard to make the writing lively, and often went overboard poking fun at people, which I knew provided the art world with its favorite dessert, gossip. I tried to skewer only people who obviously deserved it, and who, for the most part, couldn't be harmed by it, except in their egos, which were way too big to begin with. I fucked up a few times, thinking I was doing something clever, but actually venting malice—not a good emotion to work from as a rule, but let's not pretend that criticism can ever he divorced from the pathology of the person writing it. Fortunately, I never seemed to have the same pathology operating from one week to the next.

From week to week, I tried to take the art I was seeing seriously, on its own terms, but also to measure it against the wider world, and this upset people a good deal. Often the artists themselves were impatient with notices more complex and less exalting than the customary mush-mouthed rave, though most appreciated the truth of Ross Bleckner's bon mot, "Ink is ink." The unavoidable problem always was that writing about an individual's art fed into the cult of the proper name. Once the name became well-known, the ideas behind it became illegible and irrelevant. Because the underlying ideas were, in the end, so beside the point of

the art world as a social phenomenon, I felt that there was only an ephemeral sense of community in that *crush* of '80s art-consumption, one that would vanish as soon as the merry-go-round stopped and the bank accounts froze in place. Surprise, it did.

The irritation people sensed in the column was mainly produced by the circus of importunity, and the craving for art stardom, that I had to deal with week after week. Artists and dealers had myriad subtle strategies for getting my attention. I always felt bad for the artists, good and bad, who hadn't mastered the art of dissembling ambition: they would just blatantly get my unlisted phone number and call me up, beg me to come to their studio, write about them, anything. The clumsier and more craven they were the worse I felt for them. I recognized in them the naïveté and idealism I had lost: the sense that virtue or talent or good intentions should provide their own reward, that the prize goes to the best instead of to the best hustler.

The worst feeling was to walk into an opening and know that everyone felt they had to be nice to me, and that only the most resigned-but-maniacal losers would march up and insult me. Not that I craved insult by any means, but I came to despise the shrewd calculation that led so many people who disliked me to manipulate my sympathies. Obviously people were playing for big stakes, I understood that, but I also understood that we're all going to spend eternity in the same dirt. Maybe it's simply a matter of temperament. I've never been able to spend ten minutes in the company of anyone I truly couldn't stand without giving it away. The late critic Paul Taylor once told me, at one of those interminable Art Dinners at Il Cantinori, "You're the only person I know who can palpably turn his back on somebody while you're still looking them in the face." Actually Paul was pretty good at that too.

Artists and dealers tended not to comprehend what writing on a weekly deadline was about. It meant going to as many shows as I could bear to—and that meant being cornered and courted by virtually the same number of art dealers. This was more problematic for me than for a "professional" art critic, that is, for someone who derived his or her social gratification from being important in the art world. Being important in the art world made me feel unimportant, since I wanted to write novels and hadn't gotten around to it. Writing every week, under the hideous pressure of the deadline, tended to convince me that I never *would* get around to it. Generally, dealers didn't have the slightest idea and artists didn't care that my concerns were about writing, about themes and ideas, about hunting tip reasons to keep going, rather than

about some fetishistic "love of art." Or that I was almost hysterically shy, that my extravagant persona concealed a deep reserve.

The deadline made it impossible to consider more than a fraction of the art that was appearing, and the paper's editorial bent excluded any disproportionate coverage of museum shows and "alternative" spaces: the emphasis was supposed to be on galleries. I'll admit I was more comfortable with downtown ones than with the ones on 57th Street. (I've never had a problem with bladder control, but downtown I never felt inhibited about asking where the bathroom was—in fact, Robert Miller won my heart one day by saying "Pop in any time, ignore the show, and use the bathroom if you need it.") Another complication was the *Voice* itself, and the unwritten ukase that a *Voice* writer should emit a certain political rectitude. I had my own ideas about politics and art, and a growing impatience with demented readers from one or another faction who regularly wrote disgustingly abusive letters, correcting me for some slight against a newly victimized segment of the art-making population. The letters editor of the *Voice* seemed to feel that the most insane kinds of personal attack were desirable expressions of "controversy," and insisted on printing them. After a while I simply stopped reading them, though the *Voice* continued running them, sans reply.

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GARY INDIANA

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To tell you the truth, I've avoided any prolonged retrospective glance at my art-writing career since it ended. I left town on civilization's turn in 1992 and jumped out of it in 1998, and my subsequent lack of engagement with the art world has been more or less total—a catalogue here and there when it's something I really do get lost for, but otherwise, silence. Several efforts have been made to collect my writings from that period, all instigated from outside, and I have always had mixed feelings about those efforts, mainly because other people own, to like that work more than I do. When I walked into hands of the art scene, I experienced a long period of revulsion against the little big world I'd cluttered to for years of maximum exacerbation. Its present lack of irony has given that faraway scene an improbable quality, like a long fever that finally dips to a stable temperature. I am no longer involved, but living on the other side of things.

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GARY INDIANA

DARGIS *Continued from page 47*

positive images. Just as he's never trafficked in class romance, Leigh doesn't shy away from difficult women (notably in *Abigail's Party*, 1977), even if he is vague in *Naked* as to *why* "women still do allow things to happen." (On the other hand, *Hard Labour*, one of his grimmest pictures, could serve as a cinematic companion to Engels' *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*.)

Leigh may think Johnny a comprehensible "receptacle of cares and worries and preoccupations" about the late 20th century, but he's an unstable receptacle nevertheless. Leigh drops clues as to why Johnny is off-ballance (in the repeated references to his mother, for one) but never spins effects into causes. That's one reason why the character of Jeremy (Greg Cruttwell)—Johnny's wealthy, chortling analogue, a rapist/stockbroker who barks French into his cellular phone—exists in the first place. (Leigh considers Jeremy "irredeemably worse" than Johnny.) Successful or not, Leigh's unexceptional class one-upmanship is essentially as much a dodge as Johnny's riff on 666, the European bar code, and prophecy.

Indeed, the not-so-secret heart of *Naked* is the loose community of women Johnny enters and exits. His encounters with the various women in their various rooms—his curious spatial choreography—is the most poignant instance of the film's controlling image of exodus and deliverance. That the women can scarcely keep up with his wild discursive flights is finally beside the point; after all, what's the point of all that fast talk when Johnny himself can't listen? The crucial exception to this tongue-tied company is Louise, the lone woman who speaks Johnny's language and the one, in turn, to whom he listens. Leigh puts it another way: "Finally, there is love."

Johnny's incursions in and out of the women's rooms and through the streets of London are neither existential larks nor instances of sexual-space-as-destiny, but rather a pained and painful refusal of, and departure from, the only knowable community that might have welcomed him. Brian's warning—"Don't waste your life"—and Louise's counsel fall on deaf ears. Johnny talks but he doesn't hear; his words belong to a voice outside discourse, hermetically swaddled in false presence. In *Naked*, individual consciousness takes a beating, and the lonely walker, no longer cloaked in a mantle of seductive, romantic, tragic isolation, is finally and inexorably stripped bare. □

Manohla Dargis lives in New York.

1. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, 1973; paperback ed. Oxford: at the University Press, 1973, p. 239.
2. Ibid., p. 247.
3. Mike Leigh, quoted in "Nine Million, 'Leigh's Blood Transfusion for British Cinema,'" *The Morning Star*, 21 February 1972, p. 106.

INDIANA *Continued from page 43*

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O'BRIEN *continued from page 83*

since I was manipulating the sessions for my own purposes, I wasn't really being passive. Actually I found the experience liberating, in the sense that when there's nothing left to hide, you can move on. It was like getting rid of a secret.

GO'B: *Do you think women should serve in combat?*

KS: I find it kind of funny that this issue should be such a barometer of liberal views: decades ago, liberals were against combat. But I guess if women want to fight in wars, let 'em.

GO'B: *Do you think gays should serve on submarines?*

KS: Yeah.

GO'B: *Does you disagree with the President?*

KS: He doesn't think they should serve on submarines?

GO'B: *No, the bunks are too close together.*

KS: What do you think?

GO'B: *I think if gays want to be in the military they should join the Marines. They'd be prouder if they had their own service. They'd be competitive.*

KS: Why the Marines?

GO'B: *There seem to be a lot of gay Marines anyway. Their slogan is "We're looking for a few good men." Do you have any unusual skills or talents?*

KS: Finding and killing bugs and hailing cabs are my two good skills.

GO'B: *What about talents?*

KS: I think I have talent as a poet. And I can draw well.

GO'B: *Do you practice poetry?*

KS: It's something I did in college.

GO'B: *Are you right-handed or left-handed?*

KS: Right-handed.

GO'B: *Are you a registered voter?*

KS: I'm a registered Democrat.

GO'B: *Have you ever had an out-of-body experience?*

KS: No.

GO'B: *Do you believe in reincarnation?*

KS: No.

GO'B: *Do you have recurring dreams?*

KS: No.

GO'B: *Tell me a dream you remember.*

KS: [Extremely long pause] I was crossing an avenue, going to a shrink appointment, and it was flooded. Therapy was like an art-school critique with the shrink being the teacher. There were various artists there. At one point the shrink was talking about L's work, saying how good it was, using the word "thin," meaning it had no excess, it was beautifully economic. The only problem was L's inability to talk about it. I said That's okay, that can be learned. It's better for it to work visually than verbally. I asked if the teacher/shrink could come to my studio because my work was too big to bring in. I had some disappointment about not being adequately critiqued. Then I was sitting in a bar drinking Diet Coke with the shrink/teacher. We were having a fun, flirtatious conversation. I was thinking he would have liked more but for the prohibitions of the therapeutic relationship. It was as if we were on a date getting drunk together. I couldn't remember the name of the avenue that was flooded. Then I remembered: it was Second Avenue.

GO'B: *Do you have any pets?*

KS: Not now. Growing up I had lots of cats. And then lots of dogs.

GO'B: *Do you have plants?*

KS: No, just stuffed animals.

GO'B: *What's your favorite article of clothing?*

KS: I have a long black dress I like, but that will change. I go through favorites; they last about a week. I don't have a deep commitment to clothes.

GO'B: *What about shoes?*

KS: I think shoes are important and wonderful, but I hate buying them and I often wind up buying shoes that are too small or too big. I have one pair that worked out well last year, sort of platform loafers. Very all-purpose.

GO'B: *Are there any words that you live by?*

KS: It's necessary to be slightly underemployed.

GO'B: *Do you want to hear your horoscope for today?*

KS: Yeah.

GO'B: *Career prospects grow brighter. Pursue ambitions fearlessly. If you haven't any clearly defined goals, get some.* □

Glenn O'Brien is a contributing editor to *Allure* magazine and a former stand-up comedian. He edited *Manhattan's Inc.* and is creative director of advertising at Barney's, New York. He is Peace with Aquarius rising.

— *Gary Indiana with an introduction by Richard Flood*