



Critical Unity in Critical Times: The National Critics' Conference

by Camille LeFevre June 14, 2005

Camille LeFevre, longtime Twin Cities dance, architecture, and design critic, attended the first national conference of critics, where Norman Lear told the assembled critics that they were the last, best defense against the Big Lie.

It began with a tone of quiet desperation. As fine-arts critics and editors from around the country riffled through their registration packets at the inaugural National Critics Conference, May 25-28 in Los Angeles, we found an article from the Los Angeles Times by Scott Timberg titled "Critical Conditions." The oracular subhead: "Once almighty arbiters of American taste, critics find their power at ebb tide. Is it a dark time for the arts, or the dawn of a new age?"

Published Sunday, May 22, the article preceded us; it confirmed what we already know; and during the conference, it served as a talking point for nearly every speech, panel discussion, and breakout session. But there was little focus on the supposed "power" suggested in the headline. Disempowered is how fine-arts critics, a community of mostly freelance cultural workers (who vastly outnumbered the few employed critics at the conference), have been feeling for quite some time. The sources of this disempowerment are aiming at us from all directions and throughout the conference, panelists and attendees alike frequently discussed their impact on the integrity and practice of criticism.

For instance: On the macro scale, we're in an era of conservative politics that consistently steamrolls the truth, while fueling the sinister popularity of anti-intellectualism (with "elitism," a word that originally meant leadership, now used as an expletive) and blaming the media for its shortcomings (like getting caught on tape abusing prisoners). Then there's globalization's tendency toward homogenization, the corporate commercialism of art and the increasingly pervasive culture of celebrity that's hijacking visual culture (just look at the number of Tony Awards handed out to film actors this year... and I'll leave corporate sponsorship of art centers and Broadway shows for someone else's dissertation).

Newspapers, which are bleeding readership due to the Internet and an aging population of loyal readers, cut their arts coverage (and their art critics) as subscriptions decline. Meanwhile, the anything-goes approach afforded by the Internet and blogs means, on the one hand, lots of badly written opinions attempting to pass as criticism. On the other hand, the rise of the Internet has resulted in a number of websites (like mnartists.org and voiceofdance.com) and blogs (see Tobi Tobias' blog on ArtsJournal.com) are beginning to take up the slack with writers whose critical thinking equals their critical writing ability. I was proud to report that mnartists.org is one of the few arts-journalism websites that pays its writers.

By the end of the conference, however, a raucous affirmation of the critic's critical role in 21st-century culture had taken hold among the ranks of jazz, classical-music, dance, theater and visual-arts critics. The momentum began with social activist and television director Norman Lear, who opened his keynote address,

“Seeing the Critic as Critical,” by acknowledging that his characters Archie Bunker, George Jefferson, Fred Sanford, and Mary Hartman were “arguably four of the least intellectual characters ever to be seen on television.”

After such protestations, Lear assumed his role as cultural advocate, affirming that “arts criticism will survive whatever adversity it is currently facing—because the human impulse that animates criticism is as elemental and necessary as the one that animates art itself.” He continued with a call to arms that was as politically damning as it was culturally incisive. “Contemporary politics and culture need you,” he said to the hundreds of critics in the room. “They need to hear from probing, intelligent minds that provide a moral gyroscope for our wildly confused culture, and are willing to speak truth to power.... This, I submit, is precisely what so many cultural conservatives are fearful of.”

Lear commended critics for cutting through the effluvia of political and commercial “bullshit” flowing into every pore of society today, and urged us to continue despite the systemic deprecation of intelligent thought and cultural complexity. “You are there to give us some perspective on how truthfully and skillfully creative works are speaking to power, and to point out when they are not,” he said. (Question in retrospect: What if creative works have no intention of speaking to power, but advance and challenge their art form nonetheless? Caveat: Only in LA, I suppose, would encouragement from a television icon be inspiring and appropriate.)

With this, the conference began. What followed were topics specific to each discipline, board meetings, social events, performances and gallery tours. Most instructive, however, was a day of interdisciplinary sessions addressing such topics as “The Role of the Critic in Contemporary Society,” “Covering the Unfamiliar: Writing Across Disciplines,” “How to Get a Job: What Editors are Looking for in Critics and Criticism” (the panelists drew fire), and “Digital Media & the Future of Arts Journalism.” Here are the significant themes and variations that arose during these sessions (with the speakers who raised these issues identified) and that subsequently galvanized our work sessions at the end of the conference:

- How do we retool criticism to deal with revolutionary changes in concepts and practice (Alan Kriegsman)?
- We must not only continue to delve into our own fields of expertise, including boning up on the new critical theories coming to bear on interpretation, but also “function more like artists and continue to expand our sensibilities” to become more interdisciplinary in our scope and practice (Margo Jefferson).
- Critics need to “extend the reach of one’s criticism by bringing in other subject matter,” whether political, social or cultural (Jack Miles).
- There’s tremendous pressure to not be brutally frank in our criticism, yet now more than ever it’s necessary; this is a problematic situation (various sources).
- Critics must bring the relationship between culture and commerce out into the open (Coco Fusco).
- Artists often intuit changes in politics and society long before they appear in the mainstream. Critics aspire to be, and must work to be, the ideal receptor and communicator of the artist’s intuition (Jack Miles).

In the realm of critical writing style, newspaper editors had these ideas to offer:

- Critics should become adept at writing about a variety of disciplines and popular culture to be marketable.
- Ferret out the news behind the arts, the business of art. How is art news? This is how to get art and criticism on Page 1.
- Fine-arts critics need to be (deep breath now!) fantastic writers with distinct voice, style and personality; witty, humorous, erudite, accessible, intelligent, prolific, curious, and quick and clear in making a point;

entertaining, explanatory, interdisciplinary and knowledgeable about pop culture (“Desperate Housewives” was frequently invoked; feel free to draw your own conclusions). We also need to develop a following or audience, work in various media (print, broadcast, Internet), and so on.

The next day, these themes and ideas were processed into concrete action steps during proactive think-tank sessions. The proposals for action that arose from the groups included: transforming NCC into a non-profit organization with a website, a board, and a conference every two years (rather than every four years, as initially planned); creating an NCC political action committee (if we changed our name to the Society of National Art Critics, we’d be known as SNAC-PAC) that could provide advocacy, health insurance, etc; and various public education and critic training initiatives, including an interdisciplinary buddy system whereby critics from different disciplines would attend performances and learn about critical perspectives from each other.

Since my return from the NCC, I’ve been asked about the highlights of the conference and what I returned home with as a result of my participation. First, I emerged from this conference feeling much less isolated as a member of a new, diverse, vital, active and intelligent community of critics. Second, I have renewed energy in and commitment to my role as a critic. Third, I’m determined to: continue expanding the range and depth of my critical writing; rethink the paradigm of traditional criticism to figure out when and how dance and architecture are news; work more closely with my editors in order to write criticism that’s incisive and accessible; and bring criticism to new audiences. Whew. I’m already exhausted just writing that. Any suggestions? I’m all ears.

To conclude, in rereading Timberg’s art-critics-are-on-the-wane article, I’m struck by a comment from ArtsJournal.com’s Doug McLennan. He says, “The audience for the arts is going up in this country... And we’ve gone through a decade where the building of arts edifices all over the country has totaled billions and billions of dollars. Clearly the field is not shrinking. And yet the influence of critics is.”

Our opportunities, our pay and our influence may be declining, but as so many of the NCC speakers also reiterated, the need for meaty, incisive, intelligent criticism is escalating. Everything in McLennan’s quote leading up to that final sentence points to this need; the necessity, in the words of Norman Lear, for voices unafraid to carve paths through the bullshit.

Camille LeFevre will soon start a blog on dance, architecture and critical theory; if you’d like to join in, feel free to send her an email at camille@visi.com. To read Scott Timberg’s article go to: www.calendarlive.com/printedition/calendar/cl-ca-critics22may22,0,6773522.story?coll=cl-calendar To read more about the National Critics Conference, go to: ascweb.usc.edu/asc.php?pageID=379

<http://www.mnartists.org/article.do?rid=71550>