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Motown Review of Art

A blog about visual art and other aspects of culture in Detroit and vicinity.

Friday, February 14, 2014

The New Art Examiner: A Critical Field of Dreams

I was recently invited to present a paper by [Buzz Spector](#) as part of his panel titled "Wide Eyed Reading: The Legacy of the New Art Examiner" at the College Art Association [2014 annual conference](#) in Chicago. For those who don't know (primarily the youngsters), the [New Art Examiner](#) was published mainly out of Chicago from 1973 until June 2002. It is generally acknowledged to be the largest and most influential art magazine to have come out of the Midwest. The panel was prompted by the last year's publication by Northern Illinois University Press of the anthology [The Essential New Art Examiner](#). In addition to Buzz and me, the panel included (in order of speaking) [Richard Siegesmund](#) currently of Northern Illinois University, [Susan Snodgrass](#) of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, [Paul Krainak](#) of Bradley University in Iowa, and [Duncan MacKenzie](#), co-founder of Bad at Sports.

I've known Buzz for decades, due to the [New Art Examiner](#) but also because he showed at Cantor/Lemberg Gallery in Birmingham, then at Revolution in Ferndale. I also reviewed his show at Cranbrook Museum for [New Art Examiner](#). Susan and Paul I had known for many years through their writing in the magazine but had never met in person. Although I am not included in the anthology, I was affiliated with the magazine from summer 1984 until its demise. Below is the text of my remarks. I have added hyperlinks to the text to provide some additional context. Also, I presented images of some of my articles along with select covers of the magazine. I've uploaded some of the covers and some of the articles in case anyone wants to read them.

The New Art Examiner: A Critical Field of Dreams College Art Association, February 12, 2014

About this blog



Vince Carducci, publisher

Royal Oak, MI, United States

There's a saying that in America, we get the culture we deserve. In Detroit, we have gotten far better. This blog was created to help bring art being made in the Motor City to a larger audience. The author, Vince Carducci, has written for many publications over the last two-and-a-half decades, ranging from alternative weeklies and webzines to academic journals, anthologies, and encyclopedias. He is Dean of Undergraduate Studies at [College for Creative Studies](#), which according to [Steven Heller](#) is "one of the vanguard art, craft and design schools in the nation, in the surprisingly beautiful city of Detroit." Follow him on Twitter [@cultrindustreez](#).

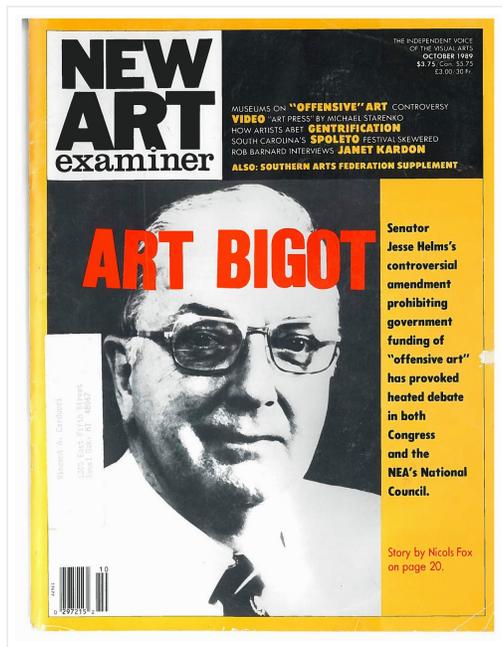
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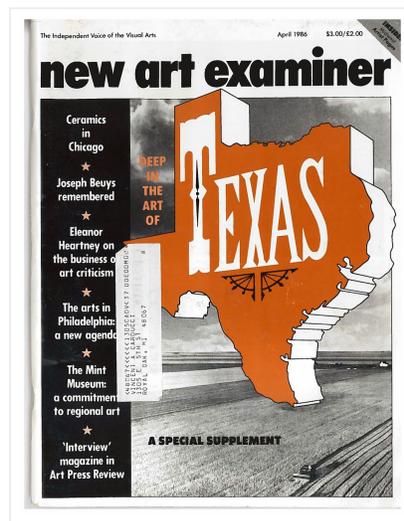
Typical accounts of the New Art Examiner (1973-2002) rightly focus on its role in creating a critical discourse around and legitimacy for the art scene and artists of its home base Chicago. Tony Fitzpatrick, Kerry James Marshall, Wesley Kimler, Kay Rosen, Anne Wilson, and Inigo Mangolo-Ovalle are just a few of the names of those whose work appeared in its pages and went on to gain larger recognition. And while they had local reputations starting in the 1960s, it can be argued that the *Monster Roster*, the *Hairy Who*, and especially *Chicago Imagists*, such as *Ed Pashke*, *Roger Brown*, and *Barbara Rossi*, garnered national and international attention by the coverage afforded them by the New Art Examiner.

Equally important was its role in expanding visual arts coverage in the whole of the Midwest and beyond with monthly exhibition reviews and features on artists working in Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, Missouri, and elsewhere. The magazine enabled critics, art historians, and other writers to explore topics outside the art centers of New York and Los Angeles, creating a record of activity that would have otherwise gone unnoticed (right.) These writers developed their writing skills, CVs, and reputations, in many cases leading to significant opportunities in arts journalism, academia, museum practice, arts advocacy, etc. Some of those people are sitting on this panel, including me.

Others include *Janet Koplos*, longtime Art in America editor and studio crafts historian, *Jim Yood*, also an advocate of studio craft and Artforum Chicago correspondent, *Henry Giroux*, one of the major voices of *critical pedagogy*, *Eleanor Heartney*, another Art in America senior staff member, Alice Thorsen, now art critic for the *Kansas CityStar*, *Michelle Grabner*, co-curator of the 2014 Whitney Biennial, and there are many others we could name.

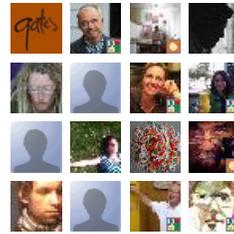
The magazine also provided a platform for writers with established reputations to publish material they likely would have had an opportunity to get into print otherwise. *Donald Kuspit* wrote several cranky articles for New Art Examiner. *Robert Hughes* also kvetched about art and money as did *Paul Goldberger* on postmodern architecture (below, left). On a positive note, Suzi Gablik published her ideas on *re enchanting art* in a precursor to the socially engaged practices that are so prevalent in the contemporary scene.

Following its original mission as an independent voice of the visual arts, the New Art Examiner also examined issues too often overlooked by the slick art publications coming out of New York. Special issues on studio craft (right) and self-taught and outsider art



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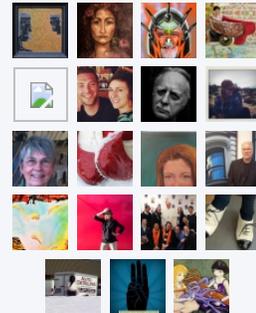
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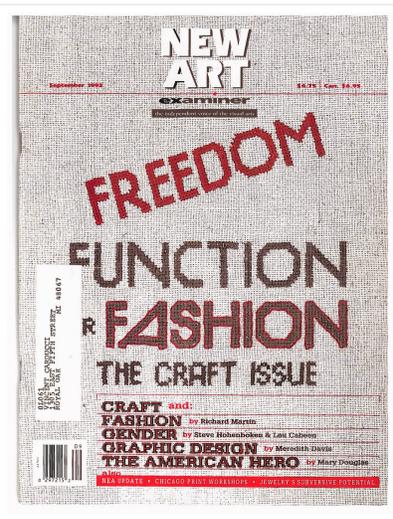
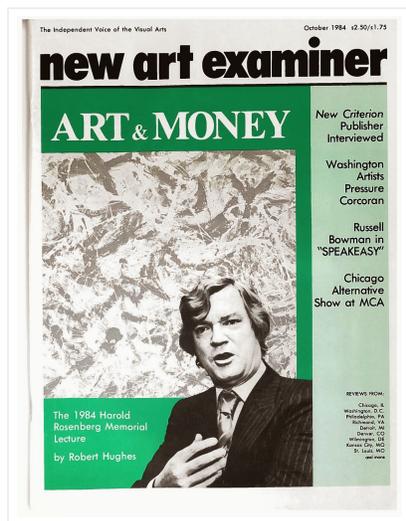
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brought critical attention to forms of cultural production beyond of the conventions of so-called fine art. The magazine also confronted issues often swept under rug in the mainstream art press such as social class, politics, and economics. During the 1980s, the New Art Examiner took a direct stand on the culture wars being waged in Washington and around the country (see image above).

From a sociological perspective, the New Art Examiner constituted a structure for navigating what [Pierre Bourdieu](#) terms the field of cultural production; it was an avenue for amassing social and cultural capital for the ideas under consideration, i.e., language as symbolic power, and the individuals and artifacts being written about, that is, symbolic capital – prestige, honor, and attention – that could sometimes be converted to economic capital in the case of artists or artworks that might become collectable, or the opportunities that might be afforded for career advancement for academics, would-be journalists, and the like. (The pay for writing was a pittance, of course, when it came at all; I only got paid two or three times over nearly 20 years of writing for the magazine and I doubt the total ever came to more than a hundred dollars.)



Within the pages of the New Art Examiner one finds the elements of [Chicago School](#) sociologist [Howard S. Becker's](#) concept of [art worlds](#). Art is a form of collective action, Becker writes, dependent upon a division of labor in establishing what Bourdieu terms the "art habitus" and Becker terms "conventions," i.e., the social rules for categorizing types of art, creative practices, institutional frameworks, and the like, for mobilizing material, social, and cultural resources for production, distribution, and consumption of these things called works of art, concepts called aesthetic theories, and agents known as artists, critics, historians, curators, etc. The categories of integrated professionals, mavericks, folk, and naive artists all get their day in the New Art Examiner's archive.

The extent of the primary source material of Midwestern art worlds in the last quarter of the twentieth century is in contained the volumes of the New Art Examiner, the surface of which is barely scratched in *The Essential New Art Examiner*.

I'd like to add to the archive by offering myself as a case study. I began subscribing to the New Art Examiner in 1980 when it was still published in the tabloid format. It was the only publication I was aware of at the time that covered art being made in Michigan from a critical perspective as opposed to the journalistic reportage of Detroit's two daily newspapers, the Detroit News and Free Press. There was a short-lived art publication that had existed in Detroit for a couple of years in the mid-1970s that had gone defunct, and the New Art Examiner was a welcome presence to fill the void. Equally important was knowledge that there was a lot of art being made not that far away in Chicago, of course, but also Milwaukee, Kansas City, Cleveland, Nashville, and elsewhere.

A couple of years later, the nonprofit Detroit Focus Gallery got a grant to start a publication of its own and I volunteered to be one of the original writers. The publication was a quarterly (and in truth given its missed deadlines "intermittently" might better describe it) and only 16 pages, so there wasn't much opportunity to engage in dialogue.

My first articles for the New Art Examiner were two short reviews published in the summer 1984. One of a group show of installation work presented by Detroit Focus Gallery was

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Poems last longer than chocolates
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- [Art Critical](#)
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somewhat critical, while the other of a solo exhibition by printmaker Douglas Semivan, who is now chair of the Madonna University art department (and father of redoubtable photographer Lauren), was much more favorable. In retrospect, both hold up pretty well. Within a matter of months I found myself named a Michigan editor of the New Art Examiner and maintained my affiliation with the magazine pretty much until its demise in mid-2002. From 1996 to 2000, I served as a contributing editor and at one point toward the end of that time had had conversations with Kathryn Hixson about coming on full-time as publisher as she was scrambling to reconstitute the magazine by moving it up market.

My affiliation with the New Art Examiner was important to establishing my identity as an art writer, helping me to develop the requisite habitus and amass social and cultural capital. Up until mid-2000, I was holding down a day job as a creative suit in financial services marketing, so the New Art Examiner gave me art world cred. By virtue of my position at the New Art Examiner I was contacted by Artnews to write reviews from Detroit in 1985. (It helped that the publisher of Artnews was a friend of then incoming Detroit Institute of Arts director Sam Sachs II. I had a bad interview experience with Sam not long after and the relationship with Artnews quickly soured. I also have to say that my writing was far too highfalutin for them.)

My book of New Art Examiner clips also helped open the door to becoming Detroit correspondent for Artforum in 1989. The editor of Artforum at that time was Charles Miller, who was familiar with my work from his time as editor of the Ohio-based Dialogue. Charlie had moved to New York after being denied tenure at The Ohio State University. He tragically was stricken with AIDS and had to leave the magazine in 1992 and was replaced by Jack Bankowsky, who didn't have much interest in continuing coverage in Detroit, primarily because Artforum had a low subscription base and virtually no advertising coming out of the region. (That was corrected a little while back with University of Michigan History of Art Department Chair Matthew Biro now on the beat.)

Finally, the New Art Examiner clips constituted the bulk of the evidence I submitted for acceptance into the Liberal Studies MA program at the New School for Social Research after I decided in July 2000 to walk away from my corporate gig and pursue an encore career in the academy. The position I established primarily as a critic writing for the New Art Examiner was also instrumental in my getting hired as an adjunct at College for Creative Studies when I returned to Detroit in 2006, and I continue to work there today, having successfully transitioned into higher education.





...to ignore the trend because of its incoherence with the ideology surrounding the Cass Corridor... (1978). Keith Asaki's proposal... an already existing photo art in Detroit... Cass Corridor... in another passage, the director, John... 'New York artist' but Detroit was describing my brain...'

The first feature I wrote (above) for the New Art Examiner was on the Detroit art scene, "Detroit: Art and Transmission," published in January 1987. Reacting against the expected role of local booster, I opened with the line, "Detroit is a hick town." I went on to reject the city's regnant school of urban expression in favor of a "lost generation" of conceptual and performance art. I've been a little more insightful on the Cass Corridor since then (see [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)).



DIA in decline

by VINCENT A. CARDUCCI

While the DIA's... the most rational level and would, in a... Without state funding... be unable to function... even the most minimal level and would, as a result, close its doors to the public, thereby becoming the nation's largest art warehouse.



JACK LUDWIG/ART. The Detroit Institute of Arts, photographed on page 101.



included, is one of the museum's recent acquisitions. But Governor Engler's ingenuity had been laid out.

A piece I wrote (above) for the February/March 1992 issue commented on the fiscal woes of the Detroit Institute of Arts with the election of rightwing governor John Engler and subsequent slashing of state aid, which recently has regained relevance in that it charted out the options for the museum, a department of the beleaguered municipal government, predicting its likely privatization, which as a result of the rescue plan in the Detroit bankruptcy, appears to be in the offing.

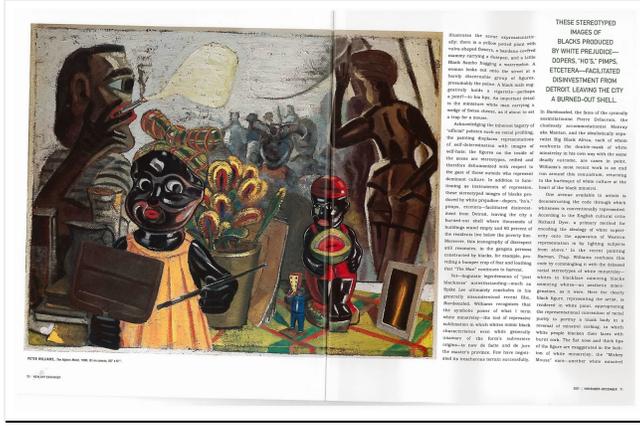
It hasn't been all piss and vinegar, though.



In summer 1995, the New Art Examiner ran my essay on The Inlander Collection of Great Lakes Regional Painting (above) assembled by sculptor, critic, and folk expert **Michael Hall** and his spouse Pat Glascock. Featuring works by artists working in the Upper Midwest between the two World Wars, The Inlander Collection, named after a journal entry by **Charles Burchfield**, was accessioned en masse a decade later into the Flint Institute of Arts, constituting a major portion of the museum's holdings in this area. As a student in **Vera Zolberg's** Museums and Society class at the New School, I documented the process by which the paintings of The Inlander Collection went from thrift store and tag sale castoff to museum quality art, using Becker's concepts as the theoretical foundation, with myself as a self-identified agent of art world change.

In the November-December 2001 issue, New Art Examiner published "**Peter Williams's Black Humor**" (below), a meditation on the deconstruction of minstrelsy in the work of the Detroit artist Peter Williams. The finishing touches of the essay were being put on literally as the smoke was still billowing across the East River from Ground Zero in the wake of September 11. Living in Brooklyn at the time with my Internet out and unable to get back into Manhattan to use the computers at the New School, I roamed up and down Court Street trying to locate a working fax machine to send the final edits back to Kathryn Hixson, living and breathing the in-press issue's theme of "Fear and Loathing."





The article ended up being cited and its thesis incorporated into the curator's entry for Peter in that spring's catalog for the Whitney Biennial. Peter Williams was the first Detroit-based included in a Whitney Biennial since the 1970s heyday of the Cass Corridor when Sam Wagstaff briefly served as the DIA's curator of contemporary art.

The members of this panel and other contributors to the New Art Examiner over the years could no doubt relate similar narratives. With the current, severely diminished state of arts coverage in an age of media convergence and consolidation, it's important to ponder how such narratives might now be constructed. In the decade-plus since the New Art Examiner's demise, no other venue of its scope has arisen. In past few years, Julie Myers, an art historian at Eastern Michigan University, has mounted two important exhibitions of Detroit art, one of pioneer African American artist Charles McGee and another on Detroit's first avant-garde, the Cass Corridor, featuring heavily documented catalogues that draw on primary sources, including the archives of the New Art Examiner. Where will historians 20 years hence go for documentation on regional art scenes? The few reviews that get published in the back pages of Artforum and Art in America aren't enough (although it's good to see them back again), and most of them have had the lifeblood edited out of them.

In Chicago, Bad at Sports and Paul Klein's Art Letter are online sources, but they don't extend their reach geographically with depth and consistency of the New Art Examiner. Hyperallergic and the Brooklyn Rail bring a refreshing independence to the art scene and make some gestures toward cosmopolitanism, but still have primarily a New York focus. In

Detroit, the new online publication ∞ Mile is providing a much-needed platform for local artists and writers to consider what's happening in the D.

This doesn't even begin to address the larger issue of the state of art criticism in general. The in-your-face stance of the New Art Examiner is in pretty short supply these days. And this has deeper implications for today.

In his study *The Structural Transformation of the PublicSphere*, German social philosopher [Jurgen Habermas](#) identifies the emergence of art and literary criticism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a crucial element in the development of the civil society that underpins democratic consensus building. The ability to think critically, according to Habermas, was honed by the likes of literary critics and thinkers Nicolas Boileau-Despreaux, Denis Diderot, Alexander Pope, and Immanuel Kant, which opened up a critical space for the political writings of John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Edmund Burke, and Mary Wollstonecraft. One must seriously wonder what the prospects for democracy are without the habit of critical thinking, which the New Art Examiner, for one, espoused.

Posted by [Vince Carducci](#), publisher at 10:57 AM 

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