

No More Flies On The Wall

What does an observer do to a room? If you ask me, this notion applies to art writing as much as it does to sociological experiments. Being an observer is the same as being a participant, only more covertly—or more hypocritically, depending on whom you ask. How does my presence, as an observer, affect the work that I'm supposed to look at?

Last summer, I tried to forget everything I'd learned about art criticism. I'd been invited to write about an ongoing performance project at the Oude Kerk, and I wanted to make myself useful. As a critic, I wanted to observe and not interpret. As a writer, I wanted to become as invisible as possible and be a conduit for other people's proposals and ideas. It was a futile ambition, and a bit vain at that. But I gave it a go anyway. I brought a fresh notebook and two pens to the first event I attended. I wrote furiously, making sure to avoid conversation—I was playing my part as a *neutral presence*, but ultimately I was still there, of course, filling a seat. By the time the event ended, I had twelve pages of notes, detailing all the interesting remarks I heard and the names of the people that had spoken them. All these notes seemed sterile to me in hindsight. And the text I tried to write about the event sounded performative and boring.

To be honest, there wasn't anything artful about what I'd written. I felt like I'd been cosplaying as a journalist. I'd done that before, a few times actually, when I'd gone to a restaurant alone. I'd pretended to be a food critic so they wouldn't seat me at the bar, or rush me to leave my table. That was a functional lie, but my stint at the Oude Kerk wasn't like that. I felt perverse about my intentions. Like I'd been pretending to write "for the community," and not "for myself." The next time I'd attend an event, I decided, I'd leave my notebook at home.

A week later there was another event at the Oude Kerk, a public conversation. I made sure to participate but I still felt like an imposter. Here I was, listening to other people's stories, while at the same time thinking about ways to turn what I heard into a 2000-word essay. It all felt a bit parasitic. But then, unexpectedly, the moderator invited us all to sing a hymn. I'd never sung a hymn

before. And the idea of singing in public intimidated me. But everyone else was already joining in, and I didn't want to stick out. I started whispering the lyrics to the song. It felt vulnerable, but also exciting, in a way. I started singing a little louder. I was out of tune, but I was enjoying myself.

When I came home, I wrote a short essay about the event and the hymn we'd sung together. The result was not particularly intellectual, and I could already tell it'd be of little use as a promotional text for the venue. But the text had a nice rhythm to it, and it felt vascularized—alive. It read like it was "true," though it obviously was a stylized adaptation of the event rather than a truthful report of it. As an interpretation, it was unsupported by all evidence besides my use of the I, and the things I claimed to have seen. But in emphasizing the fact that I was the one doing the "seeing," the text felt like a worthwhile piece of art criticism to me anyway. In acknowledging that I'd been a part of the event that I was describing, my whole account of the moment seemed less contrived.

My problem with a lot of contemporary art criticism is that it's trying too hard to be descriptive. It tries to convey what the art itself does, without reflecting on the critic's role in representing the art through writing. By default, a writer is never inconspicuous—they are the one who gets to put their name at the top of the page. If you ask me, one of the most perverse things a critic can do is to pretend they are objective. Every writer brings their own preferences, prejudices, and insecurities to the table, and all of these inform their critiques. This is not to say that I think every critique should read like a personal essay, or some kind of confession—I don't think critiques should read like they were written out of guilt. But so much contemporary art writing seems excessively conceptual to me. Art as ecology, art as mycelium, art as entanglement, et cetera. I get where it comes from, because my generation of critics learned to shun the "I" in any written analysis. The "I" was too casual, too subjective. Art itself is subjective, though. And so the most "apt" review an art critic can write, perhaps, is a text about themselves in relation to the artwork.

The presence of a critic affects what is happening in the room. It feels dishonest to not acknowledge this, to try and hide the critic's body behind a theory. And to valorize an artwork only through theory also seems unnecessarily elitist—as if art can only be appreciated through an academic lens, and that a more informal or subjective reading is too “underdeveloped” an artistic experience. Not only critics write like this, by the way. I've seen museums do it too, in the accompanying descriptions of their displayed works. Excessive conceptualization makes art inaccessible (and not in a good way) and seems to excuse the author of any personal responsibility. As if their reading of the work is “true” because it can be rationalized through theory, or the illusion of distance. Yet in order to write about a work, the critic had to be in a room with it. How did that critic get there?

In my own writing, I notice a critique makes more sense on the page if I acknowledge my own physicality in relation to the object. Not just in terms of material or scale, but also in lived experience. Had I heard of the work before I got to the space? Does it convince me? Do I get the reference immediately? And if not, what does that say about me? When I'm writing, in other words, it helps when I'm “there.” I cannot be a conduit for anything but myself, after all. So as a writer and a critic, it helps if I introduce myself to the reader as an autonomous viewer. A text instantly feels more accessible if it allows the reader to know whom they're dealing with. It may also, hopefully, make the art itself more accessible, in that the reader knows that they can just as easily be a viewer themselves. Does this make art criticism seem too individual of a writing practice? Possibly. But then again, isn't it?

by Nadia de Vries