INTRODUCTION

A man of the crowd, he is a direct descendant of the first great modernist poet and critic Charles Baudelaire. An American, he is also a distant cousin to Walt Whitman, Baudelaire's "New World" counterpart. Not, to be sure, the Whitman of egalitarian hymns and bombast, although our protagonist too is the ultimate subject of his texts and a natural democrat. Rather, he possesses in exceptional measure the insatiable avidity that distinguishes the self-made man of taste. In him the febrile curiosity of Baudelaire and the unapologetic omnivorousness of Whitman meet. I am speaking, of course, of Peter Schjeldahl, whose book this is.

You will find Peter among the fans. At times he is a fan himself; at times he is the guilty conscience of his confederates. Always he is the savvy witness of the shotgun marriage of art and spectacle. That aesthetic patricians begrudge him this most of all reflects their hopeless frustration with an expanding art world whose constituents simply will not mind their manners or keep their place. For conservatives of both the Right and the Left, membership in the aesthetic elite depends above all on how one takes one's pleasure. Art, they would have us believe, is the affair of those who dissemble rather than display their enjoyment and their need. It is easy, of course, to bad-rap those who fill the bleachers of culture. It is also pretty late in the day. However much one may wish to cloister art and so preserve it as a strictly contemplative pursuit, artists themselves have long since fled the serene precincts of church and academy. With good reason, since art thrives not only on opportunity but also on sheer flux. By the mid–nineteenth century, Gustave Courbet was pitching his tent on Paris's artistic midway and pitching his reputation in the popular press. The salon became the Salon; the aristocratic drawing room metastasized into a stadium of pictures. Honoré Daumier sketched and recorded the doings and sayings of the masses that flocked to this new entertainment, and if he concentrated on the fools who came to be seen more than to see,

we know that somewhere in the crowd his friend Baudelaire was busy talent-scouting.

The nineteenth-century dandy now seems quaint, even risible. Bohemianism ages badly, and the theater of daily life has changed, becoming at once gaudier and chillier. Spotting Whitman's shade in a California supermarket, Allen Ginsberg wrote with whimsical and affectionate sadness, "I saw you, . . . childless, lonely old grubber, poking among the meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery boys." Melancholy by temperament, a dandy can nonetheless ill afford nostalgia. Even if it compares unfavorably with the past, the present is his sole concern. Of necessity, then, he is a man of fashion. And why not? He is not fashion's slave but its watchful scribe. Paradoxically, those who hate fashion are the ones who most zealously believe that "the clothes make the man," forgetting in their ardor that style is human possibility, not a state of nature. Fashion is the promise of identity. Conversely, it is camouflage as well. Careful study of the manners of his time permits the man of crowds to move easily in the variegated mass that is his vital medium. "Dressing the part" and adopting the speech of one's temporary milieu is an act more of empathy than of subterfuge. This chameleonlike willingness to slip into and out of character, like an author's decision to impersonate his subject, is none other than an expression of a deep desire to make contact. Using E. M. Forster's injunction "Only connect" to title a column on Bruce Nauman, an artist with whom he feels special kinship, Peter fully registers the difficulty of that demand and Nauman's ingenuity in meeting it with the mesmerizing fluidity of his persona.

The frequent mention of poets is deliberate. Peter is a poet. Moreover, the archetypal sensibility of which I speak has almost always emerged from the ranks of poets doubling as art critics. Baudelaire is the first in line, Guillaume Apollinaire the second. Paul Eluard, André Breton, and a host of others tried their hand at the job with varying success. The tradition then moved, as vanguard art for the most part did, to New York. There it found its most eager and agile spokesman in Frank O'Hara. "Ah Jean Dubuffet," he wrote, "when you think of him / doing his military service in the Eiffel Tower / as a meteorologist / in 1922 / you know how wonderful the 20th century / can be." Substituting a bright benediction for the murky rhetoric of existentialism and the nervous chatter of symposia, O'Hara saved criticism from the muscle-bound embrace of philosophers and the polite lust of connois-

seurs. Waspish cheerleader of the avant-garde and "everyone's" intimate, O'Hara was an exemplary enthusiast, the fan's fan. The mark of his seriousness was the teasing and tender regard he showed for the rough creations of those he admired. Concurring with Baudelaire "that the best criticism is that which is entertaining and poetic, not coldly analytic," O'Hara emended the Frenchman's famous credo that it must also be "partial, passionate, and political" with a bittersweet admonition, "Oh be droll, be jolly, and be temperate! Do not / frighten me more than you have to! I must live forever."

These days, O'Hara's type of criticism has few defenders and still fewer practitioners. In Peter, however, it has a master. For him, as for O'Hara and all the others of their tribe, art writing is a case of pleasure turned to profit. Small profit, mind you; for despite all the glitter that now attaches itself to the art world, even the most visible critics earn little as compared with the artists about whom they write or the curators, dealers, and professors they so easily offend. As free-lancers, they choose a difficult and conditional freedom, surviving as best they can outside or at the margins of the art world's increasingly corporate structures. Since it is widely assumed that no such freedom is possible, that secretly all critics are kept by one or another market or academic faction, preserving independence requires a persistent irritability, a constant willingness to bite the hand that feeds. Taking such writers for granted is a sure-fire provocation.

More than once Peter has fallen out of love with artists as passionately as he took to them in the beginning. He has just as dramatically reversed himself in favor of an artist he has previously found wanting. Consider his change of heart regarding the late work of Philip Guston; in 1981 he was Guston's most articulate detractor, in 1988 among his most eloquent advocates. All of which is to say that Peter is content to be the prisoner neither of his own past opinions nor of the current consensus. Stubbornly exercising the right to disagree with himself, he reminds one that liberty is best guaranteed by a measure of perversity. Indeed, the list of publications for which he has written—and of those for which he no longer writes—attests to the fact that he is not an institutional creature. Without teaching post, editorial sinecure, or private income he belongs to what is fast becoming an endangered species, the critic who writes for a living and whose life is writing.

An amateur of painting like his predecessors, he is, where words are concerned, the consummate professional. As a poet-critic, Peter is

moonlighting, not potboiling. Far from disdaining criticism, moreover, he believes, correctly, that it is itself a form of literature. We did not have to wait for "postmodernism" to be certain that it had a dignity of its own. Oscar Wilde, another dandy, said as much—hence the title of his essay "The Critic as Artist." A corollary of this belief is that all judgments of quality must be predicated on a knowledge of the rules pertaining to each genre. A branch of criticism as a whole, art writing in turn comprises many subgenres: the short review, the survey of trends, the portrait, the obituary, the catalogue essay, the "think piece," the rave, the pan. In each the author assumes a distinct responsibility toward the public; each grants a certain license and exacts a certain restraint.

For example, it is hard to be "fair," that is, detailed and measured, in a two-hundred-word review. Reviewers can, however, be precise. To do justice to the work, good or bad, they must be vivid. At the other extreme, a catalogue text, written at an artist's or gallery's behest, is by its very nature an endorsement, but it need not fawn or bore. Praise is the most telling test of critics; few are good at it because it depends less on authority than on self-exposure. More generally, at the same moment frontline critics herald the new, they announce the waning of their infatuation with what preceded it. If they are to account truthfully for that experience, their exuberance will always be mixed with regret; their subject is a romance betrayed as well as a discovery made. Only the callow observer or the market booster rejoices in novelty at the expense of previous obsessions—or attempts to deny the latter. Peter commands all these genres and the complex contrasts of tone they require. Above all a master of the lapidary sentence, he is unmatched at short formats, though recently he revived Baudelaire's discursive staple, the "Salon," describing the typical Soho gallery "space walk" as though he were meandering through imaginatively contiguous rooms of a giant nineteenth-century exhibition. Unique in all of American criticism is Peter's poem-monologue "Dear Profession of Art Writing." A parting shot to a vocation he tried to abandon in 1977, it is the fullest, and funniest, description anyone has made of the cold-sweat nights, chronic self-doubt, and exasperated pride of the deadline critic.

There, as in his work generally, Peter's voice sounds the cadences of everyday usage. For him the mot juste is American speech framed

by a prosody that forces us to hear its surreal echoes. Stripped of Gallicism and allied to a street-wise sense of the absurd, that latent surrealism is thus neither more nor less than the giddiness accompanying the recognition that sensations are ideas and that everything is an intoxicant. "The child sees everything as novelty," Baudelaire tells us; "the child is always drunk . . . and genius is no more than childhood recaptured at will, childhood equipped now with a man's physical means to express itself." Peter's preferred "means" is the essay, or more precisely the weekly or monthly column. Although it is the habit of intellectuals to despise journalism, Apollinaire looked to signage for modern poetry and to newspapers for modern prose. He was not mistaken, nor was this merely a cubist conceit. In journalism immediacy is at a premium; literary etiquette counts for little. Although most poets and critics learn their trade in universities, where they read what Apollinaire said remote from the urban chaos in which he did his "research," Peter, a college drop-out and unsuccessful expatriate, began his apprenticeship as a reporter—a sports reporter, in fact. That he feels a strong, and reciprocated, affinity for the *New Yorker* baseball writer Roger Angell is understandable. Quick to follow a lead and versatile in his address, he has more in common with newspaper and magazine writers in other fields than he does with his supposed art-world peers, most of whom he took care to rebuke in "Dear Profession of Art Writing." Impatient with dull hierarchies, he could write in another poem: "The top athlete is sublime / as all things extreme, and perfect in their extremeness, / are sublime, as great poems and paintings are, / and how one can love the one and not the other is beyond me."

Like Angell or any good journalist, Peter writes to be read. The craft of journalism demands much more than a simple desire to be factual; in art criticism, of course, "facts" frequently play a small role. Journalists address a public that scans the printed page on time borrowed from work and routine recreations; the good journalist willing to be plainspoken expresses an innate generosity toward the reader. After all, even though the reader and writer may not share the same information, they are in many ways beset by the same distractions and anxieties. For an essayist, to talk straight to his audience is, therefore, to talk straight to himself as well. Peter's agitated spirit thus inhabits a fluent vernacular prose. Without recourse to Whitman's exhortations

or the didacticism of the ideologically "correct," Peter injects a democratic common sense into what is otherwise an exercise in aesthetic discrimination.

Such accessibility is often looked down upon as pandering, just as an inherent avidity for the new is easily judged as modishness and changes in taste as proof of fickleness. Like contempt for the transient, disdain for the vulgar is the intellectual vice of the prematurely wise and the congenitally stolid. "Gloom and solemnity," Ezra Pound once wrote, "are entirely out of place in even the most rigorous study of an art originally intended to make glad the heart of man." Willem de Kooning reminds us that much of the best art is made from "silly ideas," adding, "Spiritually I am wherever my spirit allows me to be. . . . Art never seems to make me peaceful or pure. I always seem to be wrapped in the melodrama of vulgarity."

Not surprisingly, he is in the front rank of Peter's heroes: "Saw de Kooning drunk and saw him sober, dazzling man!" To be sure, genius is hard, if not impossible, to live with and ultimately unknowable. Do not suppose, however, that a critic can fully grasp art's truth or difficulty without some familiarity with artists. For the contemporary art writer, the choices involved represent an imaginative as well as emotional crucible. In the maelstrom of art-world egos, those of writers are not the least vulnerable or vain, further compounding the problem. Throughout Peter's writing, there is evidence of the mutually wounding awkwardness between critic and artist. One of the most intriguing aspects of rereading him is to hear the subtle counterpoint such reciprocal ambivalence adds to his central themes. It has been as much through friendship as through solitary scrutiny, however, that Peter has explored the art of his moment. To the benefit of his audience, he has learned on the job, by confrontation and by osmosis. Lest this method suggest a lack of proper credentials, it is worth recalling that the two critics of the 1950s who now dominate college syllabuses had no formal art-historical training—Clement Greenberg started out his career as a customs official with a literary education, whereas Harold Rosenberg began as a poet and survived as a free-lance pundit and sometime ad man. Neither haunted the stacks, but both had the good sense to hang out in bars.

In truth, all genuine fans are autodidacts. Learning a thing is, after all, the making of its meaning. Close to the action, eavesdropping on those at the heart of it, mingling with rookies and veterans alike after

the game is over—although art, like other such "useless" but rigorous contests, recognizes no definite end, only intervals of engagement—Peter still proceeds like the dedicated baseball reporter. His seminars are arguments in the stands, where the rank-and-file enthusiasts and the true and most irreverent experts congregate. Competition is constant on and off the field. In the art world similar exchanges occur at the openings, parties, and Saturday-afternoon rambles that fill the calendar and mark out the progress of the season. At these gatherings, as at the ball park, disagreement is the object.

Peter and I meet in such places, and our friendship is the product of amicable contention, although, as the reader must by now have guessed, this is less a formal introduction than a fan letter from one writer to another. Our acquaintance began with an argument by correspondence over a review Peter had written for the *Village Voice*. We have since become the best of adversaries, and therefore the best of companions. Although I sometimes dispute his estimates of how good a particular artist is—I am inclined to the long view, and he counters with a "fast take" that is often more complex and compelling than the work that inspired it—rarely, if ever, do I dissent from his ideas about who is worth watching. Indeed, he has an uncanny knack for figuring out what is happening or about to happen, in the context of which, predictions about how it will all turn out may simply—and pointlessly—censure delight. He has an even more acute instinct for shifts in popular culture and public sentiment.

As keen an observer of the dynamics of crowds as of the compulsions of the art scene's principal protagonists, Peter takes as his subject not so much the formal course of painting and sculpture as the energy that engenders and envelops them. Sharply focused in its psychic detail, each article contributes to a running chronicle of where that energy accumulates, how it is marshaled, and how it is spent. Without the historian's distance or the luxury of axiomatic theoretical Truths, the working critic must render a vital account of things seen and heard and felt. In the rush of events, being "right" is never having to say you're sorry, and never having to say you're sorry means never saying very much. The rigor and probity of such criticism is, therefore, manifest in the frankness with which it concedes its partiality and examines its ultimate and absolute subjectivity. Wilde again: "There are two ways to dislike art. . . . one is to dislike it, the other to like it rationally[;] . . . criticism is, in its highest development, simply a mood,

and . . . we are never more true to ourselves than when we are inconsistent." To read Peter is to follow the sparks thrown off by a mind in constant friction with the world around it, a mind never at rest but fundamentally accepting of the contingency of its thought. Replacing the sociology of context with its poetics, his essays are the complete analogue to the excitement on which they report.

"Then they had this big party and called it the '60s," Peter once wrote. "I was there. Weren't you there, chum? Too bad!" Since then, "they've" had an even bigger party and called it the eighties; in the interim of the seventies, parties were fewer and farther between. Peter was "there" all the while. One must excuse him the teasing arrogance of his rhetorical challenge; he is not the bouncer but rather the reader's inside man. Hence, if you were not there and want to know what it was like, study these texts with care, not forgetting to savor them at the same time. No other critic offers a more accurate or more usefully idiosyncratic record of the anticipation, exhilaration, and exhaustion that register the cycles of the present art world. Combining the desperate alertness of the dandy, the prickly urbanity of the New Yorker, and the skepticism of the midwesterner—imagine a simultaneous utterance of Diaghilev's hopeful demand "Astonish me!" and Missouri's doubtful motto "Show me!"—Peter has made himself the essential critical stylist of our jumpy but incandescent fin de siècle.

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