



ESSAYS & REVIEWS

# *Vernacular Criticism*

By BRIAN DROITCOUR JULY 25, 2014



Rodney Graham, *Book Shadow*, 2010 (detail). Courtesy 303 Gallery.

*The most interesting place to read about museums is Yelp.*

“Boyfriend says that it’s a little silly to review a museum like PS1 because it has so many rotating pieces/exhibitions,” writes Yelp user Saskia S. in her five-star review of MoMA PS1, a contemporary art center in Queens. Boyfriend voices the status quo: Reviews of museums should reflect their rotating offerings, which means that the appearance of reviews should be metered by periodicals—the daily newspaper, the monthly magazine—whereas a Yelp review sits in online stasis, which is a little silly. Another subtext, which Boyfriend is perhaps too polite to say aloud, is that the high refinement of what museums do is best addressed by the professional critics who write for those periodicals, rather than Yelp users such as Saskia S.

The accumulation of Yelp reviews over time is meant to establish the reputation of a local business that Yelp’s users wouldn’t otherwise know about or know what to think of. The reputation of a museum, on the other hand, is established a priori, by the fact of its status as a museum. Museums are landmarks. When I’m on Manhattan’s Upper East Side I don’t open Yelp to find a good local museum to check out—I open it to find a place to get lunch after going to a museum there, which is the only reason I ever go to the Upper East Side.

And yet Yelp reviews of museums can be insightful, colorful, or strange (or, in Yelp’s own nomenclature, funny, useful, or cool):

“However, it seems that the artwork seem to curated neither chronologically nor harmonically with other work,” May Y. writes in a three-star review of the Metropolitan Museum of Art that bristles at its encyclopedic miscellany. “I felt like as if I were in a large field with different patches of flowers around me.”

“Being asian w/ tote bag n ‘art’ student id at the Whitney during a Yayoi Kusama show felt like a fag with more than 2 photo tags on patrickmcmullan.com wearing all black harem pants n rick owens.” Valeriana S. writes in their three-star review of the Whitney Museum of

American Art. “Aniwai, I’m sort of on a diet off processed food n faminist art, so the majority of my interest was spent on spotting fashion students (who will use Yaya’s art as inpiration for their next assignment ‘designing a collection’) n counting # of art lovers wearing dots.”

“I never really thought much of Christina’s World (by Andrew Wyeth),” writes Gretchen P. in her five-star review of the Museum of Modern Art. “Then I saw it live and in person and it hit me. In a city where so many people move from ‘the country’ to make it, where the emaciated ribs of the 1930s still show in spots, here is Christina. Her world is polio and the ground in rural 1940s (although it might as well be 1930s) America. What strikes me is that this is what I contemplate as I’m riding an elevator. It’s just a weird place for an important piece of art. [...] Then again, that’s also why I now like it. No pomp, no circumstance. It just exists and next to an elevator is where it does so.”

Even reviews that don’t detail responses to art offer frank facts about the bodily experience of being in a museum that professional criticism tends to omit. “Once you’re inside I would either use the elevator or the stairs to get all the way up to the top level. Start your visit at the top and then walk down,” writes Nicole P. in a three-star review of the Guggenheim Museum—a practical piece of advice that appears in many of the Guggenheim’s reviews.

“Carrie Mae Weems installations saved my whole visit! However, I didn’t understand why they chose to put her video pieces in a narrow hallway with high volume traffic,” writes Honore F. in another three-star review for the Guggenheim. “Also if they are gonna run for longer than 10 minutes I do think there should be a bench for the elderly and those with physical limitations.”

“Exhibits are hidden in rooms and there are no signs to direct visitors. I was informed that signs are aesthetically ugly and I should write a letter

to express my opinion,” writes Iris S. in a three-star review of MoMA. “One final observation. Women’s bathrooms don’t have tampon machines. I was told that it’s because it looks ugly!”

Yelp reviews like these are a reminder that museums tend to subjugate concerns of the viewer’s body to things like sight lines, the production of meaning through juxtaposition, the interaction among isolated works of art. To museums and their curators, the social space produced by the people’s encounter with artworks, or the needs of a body in between its encounters with art, are secondary.

In this way, many Yelp reviews confront the engineered homogeneity of the museum experience, the standardized conditions that Brian O’Doherty, an artist and critic, wrote about in *Inside the White Cube*. In these essays, written in the 1970s, O’Doherty describes the origins of ubiquitous gallery architecture and offers a critique of the white cube’s transformation of the viewer into a phantom, a spectral organ of cognition designed for the bodiless appreciation of art.

The abruptly intimate accounts of subjective experience in a museum found on Yelp defy the white cube’s bloodlessness—even if all they do is address mundane concerns about a body’s movement in space.

“I’m not a big museum fan but I do enjoy work of art,” writes Ricca R.

“I have to admit something,” begins Nadia Z. in her five-star review of MoMA. “I been postponing museum reviews for some time now. The grandiosity of NYC art museums intimidate me. How you review something that not only the league on its own, but ever-changing with bigger-than-time-itself exhibits as well? But alas, I am going to try and learn to fly here.”

Yelp does a lot of things, including a number things that make people hate it. But one thing it does is provide a platform for vernacular art

criticism, a different kind of writing about art and the public spaces where it is seen. Vernacular criticism can reject the guidelines set by cultivated artistic tastes, or it can guilelessly speak in ignorance of them, or in its naive fascination with them can inadvertently expose their falseness. Vernacular criticism is an expression of taste that has not been fully calibrated to the tastes cultivated in and by museums. Vernacular criticism inscribes bodies in public spaces that would otherwise erase them.

I yelp. I've written over 100 reviews on Yelp, almost all of them about museums and galleries. Other Yelp users have found my reviews useful (305 votes), funny (209 votes), and cool (198 votes). I know what it's like to open the window on Yelp's page to compose a new review, to have Yelp ask me to quantify my experience of a place by choosing a number of stars—each with its corresponding interjections. One star is “eek!” Two is “meh.” Three is “A-OK!” Four is “Yay!” Five is “Woohoo!”

A friend gave me a T-shirt she found in a thrift store that says “I [Yelp logo] Yelp” modeled on the “I [Heart] NY” design. Instead of a heart it has Yelp's logo, which might be described as a sunburst or a blooming flower. I'm not exactly sure how to identify it, but its suggestion of an outward explosion through a neat and stylized form seems to approximate Yelp's quantitative rationalization of the burst of feeling that moves me to write a review there. I wouldn't say that I love Yelp. But I might say that I [logo] it. “I [logo] Yelp” says less about how I feel about Yelp than what I do for it—I spill my guts, I blurt my tastes, I let them be counted, branded, averaged, muted, processed into a crowdsourced stamp of (dis)approval.

I write about art on Yelp. I also write about art on other websites or in magazines in exchange for money, and I've been doing that since 2005. I'm not an art historian. I've never studied art history, which from a distance looks like a bleakly stuffy field, concerned with questions of

influence and provenance that stake out an autonomous purity for art and its mediums, that disengages them from social or cultural history. Criticism, as opposed to history, appeals to me as a practice of inscribing art in life. I'm an art critic, and some people have said I'm "the first art critic on Yelp." That's not true, of course. If other people hadn't written art criticism on Yelp before me, it never would have occurred to me that it was even possible.

Like most people, I had been using Yelp mainly to find out about restaurants, but in January 2012, when I was searching for information on Ai Weiwei's exhibition of millions of porcelain sunflower seeds at Mary Boone Gallery, the top result on Google was a four-star review on Yelp, by Lisa Jane C. "During my visit, many people were mesmerized by the seeds, which are beautiful," she wrote. "Each one is unique, just like people."

I don't think that last line especially struck me the first time I saw it, but when I read it again now I realize it contains the seed of a theory of aesthetics whose practice is easier to imagine thanks to Yelp—one that begins with the heterogeneity of taste, a totality of dissensus expressed in subjective accounts of a body's experience at a unique point in space and time. Somehow I recognized Yelp as a detour from the homogeneity of voice and style that I struggled with in writing for professional publications: the aloof posture of academic expertise applied to paraphrase the artist's statement or gallery press release in a more authoritative way, all within the limited word count available for reviews.

And so I started to yelp.

In some ways, being a yelper isn't all that different from being an art critic.

The art critic gets paid so little he may as well be writing for free, like the yelper does.

An art critic who gives Jeff Koons a negative review is like a yelper who gives one star to the Olive Garden. The market has already made up its mind and institutional policy follows. The art critic confronts this consensus and tries to express an independent, individual opinion in spite of it—a thankless task. The art critic doesn't change the art world's systems of power; he simply gives them publicity by reminding readers that they exist. So it is with the yelper who accumulates language around a storefront or a brand.

Most art critics—the ones writing for specialized art journals, where most art criticism today is found—do little more than mimic the academic discourses of art history and art theory, often poorly, as they apply them to specific instances of art making. So it is with the yelper, who does little more than mimic, often poorly, the vocabulary and style of marketing and journalism.

The more the art critic writes the more people pay attention to their name, to their opinion, even though these opinions have no effect on the landscape of the art world, the mechanisms of the market. If the art critic writes enough reviews, they will be invited to gallery dinners where critics are served free food and drinks, and so it is with Yelp—if you yelp enough, your account is designated Elite, your reviews are elevated to the top of a business' page, and you're invited to attend Elite events where yelpers are served free food and drinks.

The Yelp Elite are people who write lengthy, chatty, mostly positive reviews, and for my first year and half of yelping I held the Elite in scorn—these users were tools, instrumentalized by Yelp's promotion of its brand identity. I didn't think I wanted to be Elite or that I would even have a chance, with only a few dozen reviews under my belt compared with the hundreds on the profiles that boasted the Elite badge. But last

October, after posting a particularly ecstatic five-star review of Friedrich Petzel Gallery, a Yelp community manager invited me to join Yelp's Elite Squad.

So I did, and I started to attend Elite events. By this point, my account had received some institutional and media recognition, and so I was curious to test reactions to my account from people outside the art world. Would they think it was funny, or novel, or stupid and annoying, like people in the art world did? When I talked about it to Amaryllis S., from Astoria, Queens, she said she didn't think my account was all that different from hers, which has hardly any reviews of restaurants, focusing instead on service-oriented businesses, like salons. Jando S., Yelp's community manager for Queens, told me about a guy in Miami who reviewed only strip clubs, and they were all thorough reviews, regardless of whether the strippers were men or women, which Jando took as a sign of true commitment. The strip-club expert had resisted Elite status when it was first offered, because he thought his activity on Yelp was too narrow, but he eventually came to terms with his own elitiness. In short, my focus on museums and galleries differed little, in the eyes of the Yelp Elite, from other reviewers' attention to salons or strip clubs.

Their opinion would probably be endorsed by Pierre Bourdieu, who in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* uses sociological data to argue that the theory of aesthetic judgment proposed by Kant in the 18th century as a description of a universal human condition is, in fact, particular to the class interests of the bourgeoisie. Like my fellow members of the Yelp Elite, Bourdieu chose not to grant art special status, to recognize its distinction from other pursuits. "The dispositions which govern choices between the goods of legitimate culture cannot be fully understood ... unless 'culture,' in the restricted, normative sense of ordinary usage, is reinserted into 'culture' in the broad, anthropological sense, and the elaborated taste for the most refined objects is brought



back into relation with the elementary taste for the flavors of food.” Taste is an embodied, sensory experience—one that originates in the gut and touches the world with the tongue. But it is also subject to a number of social abstractions that manage it, rationalize it, and build what Bourdieu calls a “magical barrier,” distinguishing “legitimate culture” through the skilled labor of identification and decoding, distinctions reproduced in education and cultivated over time.

The museum lives behind such a magical barrier. The power structures of Yelp—the hierarchy of service provider and users, algorithms of usefulness, advertising—have nothing to do with the museum’s power, and so Yelp can smash its magical barrier. Yelp puts museums into pages labeled with their names and addresses where anything can be said about them, the same as any other business.

The museum is a technology of public life, and like the public sphere, it began to acquire the forms familiar to us now in the 18th century.

Both museum and public sphere were born of bourgeois revolution—the museum quite literally; the first modern museum, the Louvre, was converted from a palace into a public collection of art by decree nine days after the French monarchy fell.

Both acquired significance as vehicles of bourgeois ideology, a worldview that did not displace aristocratic tastes and values so much as it worked to make them available, to present them as a way of life that anyone could aspire to approximate, imagined as so universally appealing and good that no one wouldn’t want it.

Both served as vessels for the bourgeois utopian ideal of meritocracy—the most rational and reasonable ideas will win the approval of an informed society through their dissemination in the public sphere; the best works of art will edify the public in the museum.

Social media is another, newer technology of public life, one so young that it's hard yet to say what purpose it serves. But it's easy enough to see that it doesn't coincide with the purpose of those older technologies of public life, because the results of its contact with them are so often funny, strange, or unnerving—the kooky comments on newspaper websites, reviews of museums on Yelp.

Social media is not a degradation or improvement on the public sphere. Though owners of mass media have attempted to transpose the logic and power of the public sphere to social media, it never comes out quite right. Social media is further from the public sphere than it is from the old world of letters, diaries, albums, conversations with friends—the private sphere laid bare in public life, without subordination to the social abstractions that govern the dissemination of ideas in the public sphere (except, of course, for the ones that users have already learned and internalized).

There has been a lot of speculation about whether or not social media can measure artistic merit—or any merit—through likes, favorites, reblogs, retweets and so on. But the conversation tends to be limited to the potential of these metrics to measure quality, without acknowledging that such a process of measuring constitutes an attempt to merely “democratize” the meritocracy. This totally misses the potential of social media to account for the plurality of tastes found in the world. And so the counting of social-media attention is always unsatisfying—these metrics give a unified count of everything whose sums mean nothing.

Yelp—as well as Amazon and other review sites—shoehorn taste into metered ratings, but they also demand a first-person expression of taste. They ask the user to be a critic without demanding the past labor of cultivation or the other social abstractions imposed by the public sphere.

Meanwhile, the public sphere regularly produces editorials bemoaning the death of expertise—its own slow death. Food and movie critics are catching up with art critics, who have been talking about the crisis of their profession for about a half century. The crisis of art criticism, however, did not originally come from the encroaching masses—the hostile arcana of the avant-garde held them off long enough—but rather because of a hypertrophied art market, whose monetary consensus renders criticism moot, and the professionalization of the art world, the MFA programs that teach artists to develop critical appraisals of their work for marketing purposes, so that it appears in public with an already determined historical significance. That seems like sufficient indication that criticism’s problems stem from its own professionalization.

The early art critic “retained something of the amateur,” writes Jürgen Habermas in *The Social Transformation of the Public Sphere*. “Lay judgment was organized in it without becoming, by way of specialization, anything else than the judgment of one private person among all others who ultimately were not to be obligated by any judgment except their own.”

Yelp is not the answer to criticism’s problems. On its own it can’t transform criticism, or museums, for the better. The reviews of museums there may eschew the academic jargon of art writing and bourgeois biases of taste, but they tend to replace them with the clichés of marketing and advertising—the register of a commercialized public sphere—found in Yelp reviews of restaurants, strip clubs, or salons.

And yet Yelp could help reset the terms of art criticism, as an environment where the judgment of one among others not obligated by any judgment except their own is newly fresh, and where this judgment is honestly subjective and contingent, as tasted by unobligated bodies.

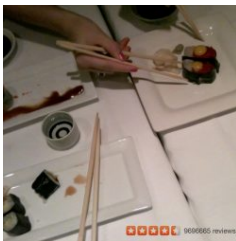


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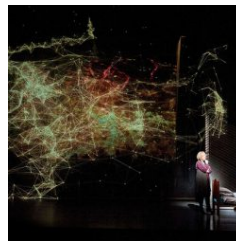
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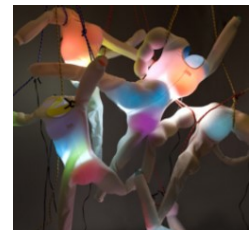


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By TOM SLEE

Yelp's self-interest, rather than any objective set of criteria, is what determines a "real" review.

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I don't think it's bad when artists treat me as if I'm there. In fact, I'm more sympathetic to those who do. Because I am.

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