

Robert Storr Interview by Brainard Carey for Yale Radio / WYBCX, recorded on March 24<sup>th</sup> 2015

Contact: brainardcarey@gmail.com

**Brainard:** Today on the show we're talking with Robert Storr, the Dean of the Yale School of the Arts. Robert, thanks so much for being with us.

**Robert:** Sure, no problem.

**Brainard:** I think I'd like to jump into the role of the critic. I've interviewed the late Arthur Danto, Barry Schwabsky, Dave Hickey – they all have a pretty varying idea of what it is that a critic does. What's your perspective on that, here and in this context.

**Robert :** I think there are many different genres of criticism for starters and there are different audiences for criticism. And I think the first choice a writer who wants to write about art has to do is decide for whom or about what they would like to write because there's no one size fits all definition of what a critic does.

Arthur Danto was basically a philosopher who wandered into criticism because his wife was an artist, and he was interested in the visual arts. He was intermittently a very good critic and often really way off base because of the undertow of philosophy and the desire to make sweeping statements, that was just too great to resist.

Dave Hickey is a very able essay writer who is actually not a very good art critic at all and has devolved from being interestingly, a spoiler in the context of the art world, to being a tea partier, basically. He mobilizes resentment against arts and he mobilizes people's sense that it's all a rigged game and plays off on that to give himself a reputation as an outsider but he's an outsider with a PhD in English literature. He is not a tough Texan - he's a kid from Fort Worth and he's created this persona which is actually an artfully constructed persona, but he's not at all what he pretends to be.

He loves to go after academics and curators and assume that they're all, you know, sold out and so on but he's the guy with the PhD, not me. And he's the guy who has advised Steve Winn and he's not known as a great Medici. And in the meantime, he's actually not very good about art. He wrote a whole long essay about Larry Pittman without mentioning Larry is half Hispanic and gay, which is an awfully big thing to miss when you look at the work. So he's another type.

Barry Schwabski is a poet and a successful poet, a good poet. I would say he belongs to sort of belletristic type of criticism and he's terrific. At least he's written nice things about me so what can I say? I mean as a painter, but you know, there are all kinds of critics there.

The theoreticians Hal Foster and Benjamin Buchloh, and so on. I think they have a lot of problems as does Dave Hickey with actual art history. They know almost none. They're technically art historians academically but they know very little art history. They've done very little primary research. They don't know history very well because they read theory about history but they don't read history.

So they will write articles predicated on certain sweeping generalizations about the 1930's in Europe and then apply them without any adjustments to circumstances which are not those. I admire all

of the Frankfurt people but I don't think the American version of French theory or a Frankfurt school in contemporary art criticism is of much use to anybody.

That's called being a critic of critics!

**Brainard:** I like that.

**Brainard:** I think, understanding the different roles to a lot of people is helpful. And then there's someone like Jerry Saltz and Roberta Smith

**Robert:** Jerry is appalling. He's the class clown. He was somebody I've known a long time since Chicago days and he's turned into a travesty even of a travesty. And the idea that he should be running around being the conscience of the art world and at the same time playing a game of the art TV show that he did - and that he should be championing women and then dissing the first African-American woman curator to do Site Santa Fe. All these things are about Jerry, long and short. And about Roberta, it's all about Roberta, long and short- and it's too bad because they are punchy writers and again, they draw interest because of the contrariness but there are no principals, and they're not fighting long term battles for anything and never have.

**Brainard:** And how does that figure in with the whole, these other schools of criticism? I mean, Jerry, he's also achieved this popularity that's...

**Robert:** He's playing to the peanut gallery. He's playing to an audience that actually doesn't know about art, that doesn't really like art. Roberta's the same way. I mean, she's writing for New York Times and she's writing insider writing for outsiders. If you read her criticism carefully and I have for very a long time, she's constantly playing into myriad battles about the art world - who's in, who's out and who she has a grudge against- but she's publishing it as if it was information that everybody needed to know, does know, etc. which it's not.

If she should write about the art right in front of her, if she would suspend her own sense of self-importance long enough to really give more attention to the complexities of being an artist she'd write better, and Jerry the same.

**Brainard:** But that's not going happen because that's part of how they are...

**Robert:** Because they get paid for it

**Brainard:** I suppose that has something to do where journalism about art is at the moment.

**Robert:** Journalism now is at the lowest it has ever been. There was a time in the 50's when you had Greenberg who was an empire builder but a very gifted one, Fairfield Porter, Donald Judd. Bob Morris. A lot of people were writing a lot of stuff that is still worth reading, you know, and I can't imagine how much of this stuff anybody will read ten years now. Mostly, you can't read it a week after it's published.

**Brainard:** And why is that? What's happening? Is it kind of the dumbing down of journalism? I was talking to a reporter not along ago who was saying everything is about comments now. How many comments can you get in an article, and the way that you get comments is by saying something inflammatory, so has this affected the art world, too and critics alike?

**Robert:** Totally, it is like, critics have gotten confused about the issue of what their role is. I mean, they're there not just to admire or just to observe but they're there to weigh and think and look better than the average person in order that the average person be tested and do it better themselves, right? So if you set a model of what it means to look hard at something, think a while about it before you open your mouth, and then articulate it carefully - you will have done your job as a critic and then you can write about anything you want.

There are many critics I read who I disagree with fundamentally but I always learn from them. But this is about instant response. It's about the number of likes you get on your Facebook page. It's all about the ego popularity presence of the critic. And frankly, none of these people, are interesting enough to really merit being a presence overall.

**Brainard:** So is there a way out of that? What is the future of writing? It seems to be just we're kind of devolving into this kind of popularity contest. What's the hope for that? Is there...

**Robert:** Charlie Finch was the pioneer of this kind of vanity criticism and spoiling criticism. And, you know, does anybody read Charlie Finch? Now? No. Does he even write? No. What's the future for it? Not much.

I'm a craftsman, I may have many faults and I'm sure I do, but I'm a craftsman, and I work very hard at writing well and I work very hard at looking before I write. And I do homework and I listen to artists and I do everything I think I need to do before I sit down and then deliver an opinion that I hope would be thought about, not agreed with.

One of the people I greatly admire, Virgil Thompson who was a composer and critic and he wrote for the old Herald Tribune and he wrote something I think is my motto. He says, "Never overestimate the information base of your reader and never underestimate their intelligence," and most of the people we're talking about do both - but backwards.

**Brainard:** Are there other critics that you can think of that you admire who are kind of walking that road?

**Robert:** There are a lot of people that I read. I used to read Peter Schjeldahl with much more interest than I do now because I think he's burned out. I like Christian Viveros-Faune who, I think he's actually trying hard to write a principled criticism. Martha Schwendener I like reading. I really admire Holland Cotter, he's doing a very good job. Mike Brenson tried to do the same thing at the Times but he was basically driven out. Chris Knight in Los Angeles.

**Brainard:** And so talking about now the academic environment, you know, why does an artist need to go to school? What is the importance of that? And I know that some of these are obvious questions, and you can take this anywhere but a school like Yale, the MFA program in particular, in one sense carries this kind of mythic weight in the art world - and then there's plenty of artists that come from Yale that didn't move on to mythic careers so...

**Robert:** Most artist don't move on to mythic careers and the importance of getting an arts education is not measured by the fame index. To be able to sustain yourself making your work over a lifetime is an achievement in and of itself. It's very hard to do. To become a good teacher of art is very

hard to do. To gain enough about your work from all angles to be able to do it properly is very important in and of itself.

The fame factor is very disturbing, right. Some people got fame very early. Jasper Johns got it very, very early, relatively. Frank Stella got it even earlier.

Jasper has been famous since 1957. It's a long time and to stay on top for that long is very hard thing to do. Most people don't, most people have a relatively short run and many of those people have very short runs early and the ability to stay in the game to make good work, to hold your head up and so on and so forth it's a real accomplishment and I think – to go back to your initial question – one of the things is that in art school you meet a certain cohort of your contemporaries and very often they become very important people for the rest of your life. And it's not like college alumni buddies in other fields. It is a group where the struggles and the difficulties that you faced are shared in certain ways. These people are often more reliable as friends later on.

**Brainard:** So you are talking about peers, classmates at school.

**Robert:** Yes. I think most good arts schools are distinguished by the dynamic amongst the students, the teaching is secondary. The schools that are fostering energy among the students, are in a way yielding to them in letting them do it themselves, some of the time, those are the great schools. And often they don't have great teachers or sometimes they have one or two great teachers.

**Brainard:** But that also assumes that they're going to get together, I mean, afterwards which seems, it's beyond the school and may or not happen. When I interviewed John Currin for this show he told me he graduated, making paintings that nobody particularly liked and he was painting houses and at one point four years out of school thought, what am I doing? He's crying on the scaffold thinking I'm wasting my time and he did essentially what you're saying - called up some friends from school, started meeting regularly and saying you know, "How can we help each other out here?" but that wasn't something that was even fostered by the school really.

**Robert:** It's because you create a situation where these bonds can grow, right. Of course it depends on the individuals and John's story is actually a fairly common story and I think that the people who go the course often find themselves in situations like that.

Before I came to Yale, I did this as an experiment – what was it that students made before here before they made the works for which they're known. Nancy Graves was making Braque-like paintings and Chuck Close was making kind of Claus Oldenberg paintings.

Once when I did my first dean's talk here I put a drawing on the screen. It was a drawing of a kind of a lumpy, middle aged woman, standard, you know, life - drawing class kind of thing. And at one point one of the female faculty members have checked in and say, "Why do you have this nude woman up on the screen?" I said, "I'll explain in a minute." And at the end I said, "Okay, this is a drawing by Eva Hesse. So first, it was the female gaze on a nude woman, not the male gaze. Secondly, it was a drawing nobody would have pegged as an Eva Hesse drawing, but it allowed you to see the enormous leaps that she took while she was here, and she was one of Albers favorite students.

Now, she took those leaps while she was here and that gave her the ability to leap altogether when she left here with Tom Doyle and went to Germany. She took a series of major leaps so that when she came back – she had a very short life, you know, she died when she was 30, 31 years old - she crammed more really serious art making into a very short years than anybody I know other than Felix Gonzales Torres. I think it's the kind of sense of seriousness of vocation and the risk taking that needs to be done that occurred here that made that possible.

**Brainard:** That makes sense and of course, those are success stories and then there's the stories you hear that I think Robert Gober touched on a few years ago when he gave a talk here at Yale. As he put it just kind of blatantly, he said, "You know, a lot of my assistants, come from the MFA program and as far as I'm concerned it fucked them up. They can't make work now." Now this is not the case for everyone but there is a phenomena where people get out of MFA's and I don't know whether it's not being able to withstand crits, but some students feel that they can't produce work after that.

**Robert:** I don't want to sound like a social darwinist, but if they can't, then they're not made for this profession. People have got to have a kind of need to do it. And they have to have, not self-confidence as a sense of knowing they will succeed, but a fearlessness about the possibility of failure. Franz Klein once said "the artist is different from people because they have a higher tolerance for embarrassment." People who come to programs like this and think only in terms of success and don't think about failure are really ducking the issues, right?

How do you deal with failure? What do you with failure? How do you retool failure to turn it into something else? How do you just withstand the emotional strain? I've had a lot of failures in my life and that's why I'm tough and that's why I'm still at it. I think a lot of kids now are hot-house flowers. They come through very high powered programs in secondary school and college and then they arrive and they just think they're going to continue succeeding. It's not like that. It's not like another profession where you can sort of get on the escalator and just go up.

**Brainard:** It's so complex because of that and I understand and also as an artist and writer, but is part of what they're learning here how to manage failure? How to retool failure? Did you say how to manage even the emotional stress of what that means to someone?

**Robert:** There was a kid who was here, a few years ago. He was an Asian man. He was gay. He came from the south and he made work that was, I thought, quite interesting but many people did not. And there was a very famous gay photographer who was in the room and who took him apart, really took him apart. And did so from a position of an older gay artist saying this is not the way to deal with these issues - and he did it I think out of sincere regard for the guy but it was really rough and I cringed, you know, partly because I kind of liked some of his work more than the other person did.

I saw the student a couple of days later and I asked him, "How are you doing?" And he kind of had this wonderful plucky attitude but he clearly didn't get wounded, anybody would have been wounded but he had that ingredient. He had what it takes to bounce back. What it is, hard to say but you know who's got it and who doesn't. Some people do it by grinning and bearing it, some people do it by smiling through the disaster – he's more of the smiling through the disaster type – but there are people who are just not going to stop and you can feel it and you know it. And they are the ones who become artists.

**Brainard:** In conclusion, you've done an awful lot in the art world. You're an artist yourself, as a writer and critic and commissioner /curator of the Venice Biennial and of course, this is your second term as Dean, what's next for you? Those seem like peaks in the art world for an academic, for an artist, for a critic. I can't imagine doing more but what would be next?

**Robert:** I'm going to do what I started out to do which was to make my own paintings. Most of the jobs that I have had that I did not compete for, that I did not go for, they are things that people asked me to do, were jobs I did because I needed to make a living to support my family. So now that I'm kind of at the age where I have enough money tucked away, I sort of don't have much else to do professionally, you know, I'm just going to make my paintings. See how we go from being a quite well known curator and critic to being a totally unknown painter and I'm really going to like it a lot.

**Brainard:** So let's just hear a little bit about what's happening in your paintings. You've been consistently painting, haven't you? You're doing more now or has it...

**Robert:** I painted always. I painted very little for recent years. I've done some print making. I've never, ever said I was not an artist or stopped being an artist because I know the minute you turn the switch off that way - you're done. Inside, you're done. So I'm always giving myself projects to do and I went to Yaddo- and I spent half the day writing a catalogue and half the day making drawings. I've been giving those drawings to benefit auctions ever since. There's not a lot of work of that type but there's enough so that I can work and say, "Yeah, this has got something going for it." And so now I'm just going to go in the studio and make lots more. We'll see

**Brainard:** Drawings?

**Robert:** Those are drawings but I'm a painter, basically

**Brainard:** And what do they look like now?

**Robert:** Abstract, geometric paintings on paper. Once upon a time, I was a realist painter, an observational kind of new realist type. I was a big admirer and now still a very good friend of Phillip Pearlstein, friend of Alex Katz admirer of Katz. So that was my neighborhood for a while but I just decided I didn't want to do that much describing so I was much more interested in the spaces in the paintings than I was in the things that occupied them so I shifted over. We'll see, who knows maybe I'll come out wild and wooly and do something else.

**Brainard:** We'll look forward to that!