The Joke is On You – Humour and Contemporary Art Criticism

Fiona Duncan

Words frequently used to describe Sarah Lucas & her art:

Dry, raw, witty, clever, drôle, sly, satirical, conceptual, radical, humourous, hilarious, angry, absurd, obscene, effortless, postmodern, funny, feminist, subtle, poignant, light, in-your-face, offensive, amusing, bemusing, simplistic, sardonic, sophomoric, crude, bawdy, bodily, tragic, comic.

THE FIRST TIME, AN OVERTURE

You only get one chance to make a first impression. As a tautology, this statement is both true and funny. In my (albeit limited) experience, however, this cliché is usually proffered as a precious piece of insight—*you only get one first impression so be sure to make it a good one*—rather than what it actually is: a clever witticism. The problem with this mode of presentation is that, in addition to being a waste of a perfectly serviceable joke, it suggests that first impressions are actually significant. First impressions, like first anythings, are memorable, but they aren’t often much more than that. My initial assessments are routinely undermined by a second glance. This is why, when first confronted with the crude reductionism of Sarah Lucas’ *Chicken Knickers* (1997), I checked my dismissive impulse and wondered if, maybe, there might be something more to it. Having given the work more thought, I am not sure there is; still, the image doesn’t bother me as much as it first did. This is because, thanks to my frustration...
with *Chicken Knickers*, I have become familiar with the rest of Sarah Lucas’ uproarious oeuvre.

**THIS PAPER IS NOT ABOUT SARAH LUCAS**

I would like to make the nature of my project very clear from the outset: I do not mean to critique, praise, or offer any new insights into Lucas’ work. I think that most of her work is great—maybe not Great (in the capital-G Genius sense)—but it speaks to me and the ways in which I relate to contemporary culture, and it makes me laugh. I intend, rather, to use Sarah Lucas’ work more as a means than as an end; that is, as a test case against which we can examine the perceived crisis in contemporary art criticism. This so-called ‘crisis’ is based around art criticism’s recent (within the last twenty or thirty years) loss of cultural relevance and identity. Without a recognizable audience or purpose, criticism has become unmoored, fractured and trivialized. At the same time, (as measured by weight) art criticism is at an all time high: there is more writing on art to be found (online, in newspapers, glossy magazines, catalogues, and pamphlets...) than ever before.[1] Attempts have been made to ‘reform’ art criticism. A dialogue has emerged. But these discussions, like the practice itself, are vast and unfocused.[2] This paper will attempt to engage in a productive dialogue about the crisis and purpose of art criticism by isolating one fraction of the problem: how art criticism can engage with art that is intentionally light, outrageous, ironic, and/or comical, as exemplified by the work of Sarah Lucas.

**UNITY & GRAVITAS**

The crisis in art criticism is often credited to the multiplicity and diversity of contemporary art. Nostalgic critics of criticism recall an earlier period when art criticism had *voice*. It is understandable that, compared to previous models such as Greenbergian Modernism—with its universal viewing subject and linear perception of history—today’s art criticism might seem a little aimless. But, as Lawrence Alloway has duly noted, the art critic’s domain is new art, not nostalgia.[3] As art practices have moved away from medium-specific work to broader forms of production and cultural discourse, art criticism has had to follow. [4] What the ‘crisis’ seems to signify is that art criticism—as a genre and as a whole—has yet to acclimatize itself to new art discourses. If art criticism is always secondary to the art it critiques, and if contemporary art lacks the easy-labels of earlier practice, I would suggest that contemporary art criticism needs
to be correspondingly multifaceted. In focusing on one kind of contemporary art practice—humorous and playful art—I aim to demonstrate that art criticism cannot achieve the kind of unifying reform certain proponents are calling for, and that this is not necessarily a bad thing. In lieu of a unifying purpose of genre, the critic’s focus must shift to the purpose of the individual art–critical text.

Humorous art is a particularly slippery subject for art criticism due to its long-standing image of authority through gravitas. In *The Pablo Helguera Manual of Contemporary Art Style*—a satirical etiquette manual, published in 2007, relating the social dynamics of the contemporary art scene—Pablo Helguera parodies the serious posturing of the art critic: “The critic at all times should adopt a serious expression while making public commentary. A lack of serious expression will result in a failure to transmit a sense of authority by the critic’s comments.”[5] In order to maintain her position the critic must write and act with a neutral, democratic, and deliberate air of importance.[6] This sober pose isn’t exclusive to the art critic, however; most art supporters (curators, directors, critics, dealers) are expected to seem disinterested, or—in David Hickey’s words—like “little tin saints,” forced to wear the “stink of unctuous charity.”[7] If the promoters of art are expected to be serious, on what ground should they engage with art that is deliberately not serious? How can art criticism keep up with art that resists traditional criticism—art designed to be light-hearted and uplifting, art that expresses a joke, or art jokes reliant on the ambiguity of the visual—without ‘ruining the punch line’, so to speak?

**APUNDANT ART**

Sarah Lucas certainly qualifies on these last points. It has been said that Lucas’ work is ‘satisfying light.’[8] Her art has an effortless quality in both its form and its content: her materials are borrowed from the everyday; her themes (sex, death, and cultural norms) are equally familiar, if on the intellectually weightier side of that familiarity; her ‘touch’ is delicate. Lucas’ work is meant to be funny. The artist regularly employs such comedic standbys as absurd juxtaposition, title-based one-liners, and visual puns. If you are not already familiar with Lucas’ work, and even if you are, I would encourage you to take a few moments to look over the works included in the appendix. I will also leave you with two quotes from the artist regarding her artistic production that I find informative:

Well I try not to overdo it. I try to be very honest. Which means, what does this
I like my things to be accessible and slightly irreverent at the same time. The “is this art?” [question] is a lynchpin of the humour in my work generally.

ON THE DISSECTION OF FROGS

At its most fundamental, the ‘crisis’ debate revolves around the purpose and goal of art criticism. There are a multitude of different ways to engage in the varied practices described under the heading of ‘art criticism’. For example, some people believe that art criticism should be viewed as a branch within the larger field of cultural criticism, while others think it stands on its own; some people believe that the primary goal of art criticism should be non-prescriptive description, others expect clear and critical judgment. What can be asserted without much dispute is that art criticism is writing about art, usually new art. Art criticism is also published outside of the academy; it is intended for some sort of public audience. What’s more, art criticism has a history that most people agree began in the late-19th century with Denis Diderot and his ‘discursive essays’ covering the new art exhibited in the French Salons. Of course, even these generally received notions are problematic. Firstly, they are all extremely vague. Who comprises this public? What of the history since Diderot? Secondly, writing about art! Art—the visual—is a form of communication not readily transmuted into text. And why would one wish it were? This is what makes art great: it can express the otherwise inexpressible.

In his essay *Air Guitar*, David Hickey elucidates the difficulties of writing art criticism: “In the act of writing about art you press language to the point of fracture and try to do what writing cannot do: account for the experience.” According to Hickey, critics end up writing only what can be written about: “We decipher that which lends itself to cipher and discard the rest as surplus.” Yet, that doesn’t stop many critics from trying to write about the indecipherable. When one’s engagement with art is mediated by criticism, the limitations of critical decryption may carry over and limit the experience of the art. Humorous art is especially susceptible to this interference. Overly descriptive criticism may preempt the experience of a joke (‘ruin the punchline’), while the kind of comfortable ambiguity and ambivalence, only appreciable visually, that Lucas relies on to engage with issues of sexuality and gender performance may be lost in the wordy dialectics of criticism. Often the simplest visual humour is
impossible to relate verbally. Example: My all-time favourite work by Sarah Lucas is *No Limits!* (1999). I have frequently found myself trying to describe this piece to others and have yet to illicit a single chortle of laughter. Here’s how it usually goes:

So you’ve got this car— a real, full-sized, was driven for years car. It’s a BMW, I think. Or some other macho sports thing. An older one... Like, it used to be the car to have but not any more. And it’s a bit shabby: rusted, dented. The car is gutted. No doors. So you can see in. In the place of the gear shift— now, get this— in the place of the gear shift, is a mold of an arm. The arm is shaped into the shape you would have if you were being jerked off, or jerking yourself off. This arm kind of lies over the driver’s seat, as if there were a body there being jerked off. And its mechanical! It moves up and down. Dickmobile, you know? It’s so funny. Really, it’s hilarious... Maybe you have to see it for yourself.

E. B. White once wrote, “Analyzing humor is like dissecting a frog. Few people are interested and the frog dies of it.”[14] The negative consequences of describing the comedy of art far outweigh the benefits. More often than not, the writing either fails to deliver or it kills the joke. This isn’t to say that criticism should never broach the subject of humorous art, but rather that one must be very cautious in how it does so. There is meaning and purpose behind every joke. Humour can function to destabilize a contentious situation or to address universal themes outside of conventional parlance, to avoid cliché. John Currin, a contemporary American painter who renders *Hustler*-worthy imagery with a Renaissance Master’s touch, claims that he uses humour to access weighty themes:

When I started making funny paintings... they felt deeper and more about heavy things, like death and sex and love, that I always wanted my paintings to be about. The sillier they looked on the surface, the more they seemed to contain those feelings.[15]

In her 2004 article for *ARTnews*, “What’s so funny about contemporary art?”, Linda Yablonsky asserts that, “For humor to exert any power in art, where meaning is layered and context is all, it must turn the ground on which it stands to jelly.”[16] Whether it is to challenge the concept of ‘High Art’ or to tackle subjects like sex and death, comedic art is never ‘just a joke’; it is this *something more* that is worth addressing in criticism.
Contemporary comedic art like that of Sarah Lucas belongs to what Arthur Danto calls “the Post-Historical Period”: the ongoing history of art within which “philosophical self-awareness” has made it so anything can be considered art. During this period, “...what makes something art is not something that meets the eye.”[17] With the ‘art’ factor no longer found on the surface of an object, but rather in the content and meaning embodied in that object, criticism becomes the qualifier of art:

What does it mean to live in a world in which anything could be a work of art? A family snapshot, a most-wanted poster, an aluminum kettle, a hawk, a handsaw? For me, it is to invent a suitable art criticism for an object... It is to imagine what could be meant by the object if it were the vehicle of an artistic statement. [18]

Without criticism, how else could one differentiate Sarah Lucas’ haphazard found-art sculptures from a pile of garbage, or her photographs of tabloid newspaper clippings from, well, tabloid news clippings? Assertion: Lucas’ art seeks to reexamine the materials and assumptions of everyday experience. She is able to do so through the frame of art— we look at things differently when we understand it as art. Danto believes that this ‘framing’ is constituted via criticism. Although Danto’s conception of ‘criticism’ seems to extend to all mental processes relating to the deconstruction of meaning in art, this absolutely includes published documents of criticism. Therefore, it can be concluded that written art criticism is central to the appreciation of art such as Lucas’. What form that criticism takes is another matter.

In his handy manual *What Happened to Art Criticism?*, art historian–cum–critic James Elkins attempts to summarize the “worldwide crisis”[19] of art criticism in 85 short pages. He begins with the paradox that art criticism is simultaneously decaying and booming: “…art criticism is flourishing, but invisibly, out of sight of contemporary intellectual debates. So it’s dying, but it’s everywhere. It’s ignored, and yet it has the market behind it.”[20] According to Elkins, the amount of criticism produced is so great that it is even outstripping its readers. [21] He says that criticism is “produced by thousands of people world wide, but
it has no common ground”[22]— the practice is extensive and fragmented. Elkins identifies seven furcated ‘heads’ that comprise what is called the ‘hydra’ of current art criticism. These include: the catalogue essay, the academic treatise, cultural criticism, the conservative harangue, the philosopher’s essay, descriptive art criticism, and poetic art criticism. As Elkins rightly points out, this seven-fold model is not rigid: the heads may intertwine or split open, and within each branch there are different levels of quality and success. The hydra model is but one way to look at “the general problem of understanding how visual art is currently described.”[23] In the following section, I will examine each of these seven kinds of art criticism as they might pertain to Sarah Lucas’ comedic enterprise. I have prepared mock samples of what the introduction to a critical work in these various modes might sound like. These ‘trials’—as I think of them—are intended to showcase the pitfalls and strengths of various approaches to writing about comical/satirical art practices. What I’ve found in my research is that writing about humorous art often ends up, appropriately enough, being funny— though not always intentionally so. Criticism that fails to recognize an artwork’s humorous intention often ends up being the butt of the joke.

TRIALS & ERRORS

The first type of criticism Elkins identifies is the catalogue essay. These are “…the truly enormous number of relatively brief, average quality essays produced each year,”[24] and have to be “the least-read of the seven.”[25] The catalogue essay is not taken seriously because everybody knows it is commissioned. At their most polished, they are paradigms of delicacy and balance: simple but not simplistic, positive but not transparent, authoritative but not argumentative, serious but open-ended. Words such as ‘enigmatic’, ‘poignant’, and ‘ambiguous’ are frequently used, as are references to renowned names and works. Above all, the essay’s purpose is to demonstrate the importance of the artist.

Trial #1:

Since her 1992 solo-debut, entitled “Penis Nailed to a Board,” Sarah Lucas has established herself as the comedic provocateur par excellence of the contemporary British art scene. Evoking the work of Marcel Duchamp, Artemisia Gentileschi, and Robert Rauschenberg, Lucas puts a feminist twist on the masculine traditions of neo-Dadaist–bricollage and assemblage. Her mixed-media sculptures and self-portraits delicately negotiate the treacherous spaces between au-
authenticity and stereotype, eroticism and pornography, beauty and grotesquery, the hegemonic and the semiotic, art and onanism [...] et cetera ad nauseum [...] critically important for years to come.

Considering that these essays are rarely read or taken seriously, and that when they are read it is generally either immediately before or after seeing the art itself, I don’t feel that the catalogue essay poses much of a threat to funny art. In fact, their incredibly predictable tone and content can provide a great opportunity for a good game of art-rhetoric-bingo.

The next model, the academic treatise, is “academic in tone, not necessarily in affiliation.”[26] In this body of work, names such as Jakobson, Deleuze, Guattari, Benjamin, and Lacan, and technical terms such as the punctum, the object petit a, the screen, the dialogic imagination, and the rhizome return again and again, serving as place-holders for arguments.[27] For the treatise writer, theoretical density is an assumed pre-requisite for quality criticism. According to Elkins, when it works, this approach “makes the art that much more difficult to discuss: it raises the level of discourse and puts an end to easier approaches.”[28] When it doesn’t, it comes across as a manner of puffing up the weight and persuasiveness of the whole without illuminating the artwork or driving an individual argument.[29] With regards to funny art, the academic treatise will either ignore the jest all together or try to analyze – or worse, psychoanalyze – the humour. This is what dissecting a frog might sound like:

Trial #2:

This month, a select group of contemporary artists will be taking over the Freud Museum in the Maresfields Garden area of London. Of these, Sarah Lucas, and her exhibition titled Beyond the Pleasure Principle is alone in its direct appeal to the psychoanalytic tradition—indeed, to the ethereal phantasma of the museum’s eponym, himself. Her mixed-media sculptures evoke the jouissance of the life and the death drives. A halogen light tube protrudes from white boxer briefs... denotata of the merging of pleasure and pain. The metalanguage of sculpture allows her to navigate the unconscious terrain of contemporary society, while her self-portraits reverse the Gaze back to the analysts’ fauteuil...
Cultural criticism (head #3) talks about art without presenting itself as art criticism. Working from the assumption that fine art is entangled with popular culture and that the concept of ‘High Art’ is misguided, these writers take “campy pleasure” in juxtaposing high and low.[30] Writers of this ilk like to come across as “off-the-cuff, clever and hip, disabused, jaded, ironic, and distanced.”[31] Popular examples include David Hickey, Sarah Vowell, and Lawrence (“I felt pretty cool about this moment of crisis about the function of art criticism when it came, because I have never thought that art was something to be isolated from the rest of culture anyway,”[32]) Alloway. Cultural criticism can function very well to address art like Sarah Lucas’, as her work provides a useful starting point for discussions about contemporary visual culture and its relation to politics and society. Also, it is common for cultural critics to create writing that is ‘fun’ and ‘ironic’; this is definitely in line with Sarah Lucas’ project.

Trial #3:

My fridge (like many) serves as a venue for all the detritus of my life which I love too much to throw away but have no other use for. In the top left corner, framing the freezer door, there is a small selection of call–girl calling–cards my partner brought me back from a recent Vegas visit. Attaching these to the fridge, and strategically placed over the women’s faces, are a series of magnets featuring Frida Kahlos’s face—asfmoma gift shop purchase a few years back. I’d never given this little collage much thought, until my partner’s mother and a friend, proper 2nd Gen-ers both, stayed at our place for a few days. About ¾ of a bottle of scotch into one particular evening, they brought up the matter of our fridge: it was, to them, deeply offensive, simply beyond comprehension. They claimed that by placing these images on our fridge we were supporting the exploitation of women, citing moralizing arguments reminiscent of Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon, as if they hadn’t been exposed to any feminist art or literature since 1983! That’s when I fetched my Macbook and Googled ‘Sarah Lucas’... The conservative haranguer’s prerogative is discrimination. This kind of critic has a strict sense of how art ought to be, and will impose his or her point of view to make “informed judgments of value.”[33] In Elkin’s analysis, the conservative haranguer, as exemplified by Hilton Kramer, seeks “skillfully made, unpolitical art, done in the name of ‘harmony and tradition.’”[34] Sarah Lucas is exactly the kind of post-modern, conceptual artist they would have a field day with...
Sarah Lucas’ recent exhibit at the Boymans-van Beuningen museum in Rotterdam is exemplary of what I have referred to time and again as the ‘empty posturing of the post-modernist camp.’ Masking their lack of skill with flashy sensationalism, these ‘artists’ can make a name for themselves, but that is about all they can make. Sarah Lucas’ sculptures look as if they were thrown together at the last minute by a group of schoolboys rummaging in the dumpsters behind the ‘gallery.’ [...] MTV. [...] reductive [...] cynical commercialism [of the] Me-generation.

Lucas is not without her detractors. The rest of her Y.B.A. cohort has even more. I appreciate most of the negative criticism made of Lucas’ work; I have even made much of it myself. But there is something about her and her art’s self-awareness and unpretentiousness that doesn’t let the criticism in. Lucas’ art, like so many light-hearted and comedic works, has the ability to swallow and laugh back at its criticism. The critic’s opinion stands but it always stands outside of the work.

For Elkins, the best examples of the philosopher’s essay are Arthur Danto and Thomas Crow. The philosopher’s essay looks at works of art as “irreplaceable sites for philosophic work.”[35] The visual problems and positions enacted in philosophic art—typically contemporary conceptual art—makes them “even more challenging and attractive to a serious critic than conventional philosophic problems posed in words.”[36] The practice is marked by precise language and an elevated tone.[37] Out of my enormous respect for Arthur Danto and out of an awareness of my limitations, I will not even pretend to try and write philosophic criticism. If I had tried, I would have probably written something to do with Danto’s theory of the end of art history and Lucas’ working within that tradition (going back to Duchamp’s ready-mades, Warhol’s Brillo Boxes, and particularly Rauschenberg’s “combines.”) I would have reworded Danto quotations such as, “the poetry of the commonplace,”[38] and, “contemporary art replaces beauty, everywhere threatened, with beauty.”[39] The philosopher’s essay is probably one of the few styles of criticism capable of accessing the ambiguous themes explored in Sarah Lucas’ work, and in humour, and in art in general.

Descriptive art criticism is “the hydra’s second-biggest head.” It is also probably
the worst approach for humourous art. Typical of newspaper and magazine reviews, this writing attempts not to judge, providing instead “an accurate, descriptive account” of new art, with a little “context” thrown in for good measure. [40] The idea is to give readers a sense of new art without ruining the experience. [41] The problem for humorous art is that any detailed description will generally ruin the punchline. There is also a broader problem: this practice portends to impartiality, which is pretty much impossible no matter how subtle the critic’s language is: choice in descriptive language is a judgment unto itself. Finally, the project of ‘accurate description’ presumes that, “works of art are already utterances in art-language that need only be translated into a better language to achieve perfect transparency.” [42] This, as D. Hickey points out, neutralizes the power of art and transforms criticism into “a kind of Protestant civil service dedicated to translating art-language into a word-language,” [43] which is completely contrary to humour’s pleasure/relief-seeking purpose. Luckily, though, the laughter is not always entirely destroyed; often it is simply transposed onto the critic herself, as she tries to decode what’s funny, clever, ironic or witty:

Trial #6:

Often referred to as the “bad girl” of the Young British Artists (YBAs), Sarah Lucas isn’t shy about provoking attention, as she demonstrates in her first survey exhibition, on at the Tate until January 17th. Renowned especially for her sculptures, which are composed of a range of commonplace objects (used mattresses, poultry, cigarettes) Lucas’ work engages with the sexuality of the everyday. Take her breakthrough work Two Eggs and a Kebab: laid out on a “found object” table of dark wood are two fried eggs and a pita–kebab sandwich. They are arrayed so as to suggest a reclining female body: the eggs are fried, over-easy: breasts with a yolk areola. The kebab is meaty, gapping. A photo of this ‘body’ stands up right in the middle of the table functioning as the face. Body as face, face as body: this is a nod to René Magritte’s The Rape...

Poetic art criticism is the final head of the hydra and what Elkins sees as “the most prominent of all.” [44] The poet-critic’s goal is to create writing that is interesting in and of itself. Its “noble lineage” can be traced back to Baudelaire and Wilde, with the most visible contemporary proponents of this form being Peter Schjeldahl and Dave Hickey. Interestingly, and to my great surprise, Hickey (and to a lesser extent) Schjeldahl are looked down upon by a majority of the
intellectual art crowd. Hickey’s work is often criticized as, “having pretensions to the literary, valorized for its tone of sensibility and its capacity to seduce,” and as a “rhapsodic substitute” for serious art criticism.[45] This probably has something to do with his stubbornly anti-academic posture, his ‘at least I don’t bow to the Man’ provocations, and his refusal to write at any length about particular works of art. All the same, Hickey is a well-known, working critic for whom “form is as important as content.”[46] Good writing, for obvious reasons, is a good measure of good criticism. It is not, however, a stand-alone definition of what criticism should be. As per Elkins:

The goal of writing well is unobjectionable, and I hold it in mind as I write this sentence: but it just can’t have anything to do with the goals of art criticism. It can’t be a definition, or an ideal, or even a quality. It is too labile, and too flimsily linked to critical content, to be relevant to the project of trying to understand what criticism has become.[47]

I will return to the notion of quality in a moment but before that I have to embarrass myself with my final hydra-head trial and the task of writing ‘well’. À la Hickey, non-sequiturs, repetitions, asides, apostrophes, jokes, impressionistic collages, and rough unpolished passages abound[48]:

Trial #7:

Jean Rhys and Fyodor Dostoyevsky: two Modern claustrophobics whose writings on the abject are frequently compared to one another—but not—because it is only ever Rhys, compared to Dostoyevsky, and never the other way around.

There is a long intellectual tradition in support of the thesis that ‘women can’t be funny.’ Women can be the object of humour, but cannot approach it as a subject. While minor challengers have arisen over the years, this thesis subsists: take a representative sample of the famous female comedians of the past sixty years: Marilyn Monroe, Lucille Ball, Mary Tyler Moore, Goldie Hawn, Diane Keaton, Lisa Kudrow, Sarah Silverman.... These are women who have made a career in comedy making fun of themselves, or rather their ultra-feminine public personas. Women who escape this bind— Ellen DeGeneres or Whoopi, for example— do so through their ambiguous gender performance. In art, that persistently—and—oddly masculine field, something similar applies...
In his concluding chapter, James Elkins calls for inter-exchange between all factions of the art criticism hydra and scholarly work. He wants to see journalists citing historians, theorists citing journalists, critics citing critics, and so on. He claims that in order for that to happen, “all that is required is that everyone read everything”:

Each writer, no matter what their place and purpose, should have an endless bibliography, and know every pertinent issue and claim. We should all read until our eyes are bleary... The hydra may have seven heads, or seventeen thousand: but it is speaking with all of them and each one needs to be heard if we are to take the measure of modern art.[49]

These are the final words of Elkin’s otherwise comprehensive book, and on my first read through them I immediately thought, “Is this a joke?” It seems awfully glib after Elkins’ assertion that there is more criticism out there for any one person to account for. How can we make sense of this contradiction? Perhaps Elkins is suggesting that we learn to appreciate the plurality of art criticism, that we try to read everything, to be aware of others’ work, and to participate in a dialogue because it is the very vastness of it all that is significant. This can be related to David Hickey’s conclusion of the purpose of art criticism. He asserts that the energy created from a single work of art—the discourses surrounding cultural objects— is so great and so important that, in terms of scale, it actually outweighs the effort and intention that it took to create the art.[50] Critical discourse “creates new images and makes new images out of old ones, with new constituencies around them.”[51] The critic generates “tiny bursts of this new organizational energy in hopes of generating more.”[52] Criticism thus becomes about participating in the dialogues about art, no matter how vast they may be.

Another way to understand the “read everything” remark is as a process to get rid of the worst of art criticism. Elkins maintains that critical and academic interchange is attainable if the writing is good enough, and the arguments “tight enough.”[53] If energy was spent on the quality (vs. the quantity) of writing, then the dialogue might become manageable. Furthermore, if critics knew what was out there— “every pertinent issue and claim”— there would be far less repetition. Finally, if critics saw how much of the same stuff pervaded critical
discourse, they might step it up, try to stand out, be more ambitious— ambition here signifying “the desire to try to see the landscape of some art practice and not just the one thing in apparent isolation.”[54] The goal of interchange is not the same as reform— it acknowledges the many ways to approach art in criticism and sees them as contributing to one another. Different venues require different writing. A local newspaper will have a different audience than artnews magazine; Rolling Stone is not The New Yorker, nor is a gallery catalogue a peer-reviewed journal. What is important is for individual critics to have a clear sense of what their purpose in writing is, and how their work will contribute to the greater critical dialogue. That is the ideal.

Art criticism cannot be understood outside of the larger art world system. Critics are hired. They need to eat. The catalogue essay is the most transparent example of market-produced criticism. This is why catalogue essays end up sounding so vague. Authorial voice—having ideas—is avoided in favour of the predictable and rote, in order to cover the critic-for-hire’s ass. As Helguera advises, when “caught between making a living and gambling his or her reputation by writing on the work of [a] questionable artist (a negative essay would of course not be an option),” the critic should,

...make a vague and generic philosophic reflection around the genre that the artist is working on. It is desirable to quote Benjamin and Sontag if writing about photography, Foucault and Derrida if about conceptual art, Adorno and Deleuze if the work addresses genre, and Greenberg and Danto if speaking about painting...[55]

Market forces and art world expectations are, of course, not limited to the catalogue essay. In challenging the notions of gravity and virtue in art, humorous art may help relieve the tension resulting from the ‘standards’ of art criticism, making room for new innovations in how we look at and talk about art.

List of Illustrations

*All images copyright Sarah Lucas; courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London.*

Fig. 1. Sarah Lucas, “Chicken Knickers” 1997, r-type print, 42.5 x 42.5 cm

Fig. 2. Sarah Lucas, “Eating a Banana” 1990, b/w photograph, 74.9 x 81.9 cm
Bibliography


Endnotes


2 For a dizzying account of the current debates see The State of Art Criticism, a record of a series of roundtable discussions between recognized art historians, art critics, and artists regarding the position of contemporary art criticism and its relationship to art history, edited by James Elkins and Michael Newman. Reading the relatively unmediated rants of brilliant minds whose positions and practices aren’t actually different from one another but who insist that they are is quite stressful. By the end, I was ready to dismiss the ‘crisis’ as the product of too much individual introspection and egotism.


4 Ibid., 199.


6 Ibid., 46.


11 Alloway, 200.


19 Elkins, 2.


27 Ibid., 24.

28 Ibid., 25.

29 Ibid., 25.

30 Ibid., 26.

31 Ibid., 26.

32 Alloway, 207

33 Elkins, 30.

34 Ibid., 30.

35 Ibid., 35.

36 Ibid., 32.

37 Ibid., 31.

38 Danto, xxi.

39 Ibid., xxx.

40 Elkins, 35.

41 Ibid., 35.


43 Ibid., 167.

44 Elkins, 49.

45 Ibid., 51.
46 Ibid., 53.

47 Ibid., 53.

48 Ibid., 52.

49 Ibid., 86.

50 Hickey, 170.

51 Ibid., 170.

52 Ibid., 171.

53 Elkins, 85.

54 Ibid., 12.

55 Helguera, 47.