

The Art of Criticism

For our Art Forms issue, we invited Holly Myers to speak with fellow critic and *Los Angeles Times* colleague Leah Ollman '83 about the art of art criticism.

Their conversation took place over email between deadlines, as Ollman was preparing to depart for a month-long writing residency.

There are critics who make their presence known in a room, who brandish their opinions to anyone who will listen and relish their role as feared arbiter, and critics who would just as soon slip in and out unnoticed, reserving their thoughts and judgements for the page. Leah Ollman '83 is one of the latter. Since graduating from Scripps with a degree in art history and philosophy, she has been a voice of thoughtfulness and reason in the Southern California art world, covering contemporary art for the *Los Angeles Times* and *Art in America*, among other publications.

I met Ollman in the early 2000s, when we were both critics for the *Times*—she still is, I am not—and knew I'd found a kindred spirit. Through our many conversations over the years, her insights into the often enigmatic nature of contemporary art and the always tricky business of writing about it have been invaluable to me, as they have, no doubt, to her many readers.

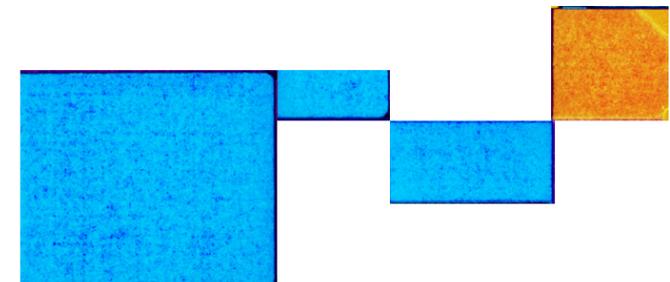
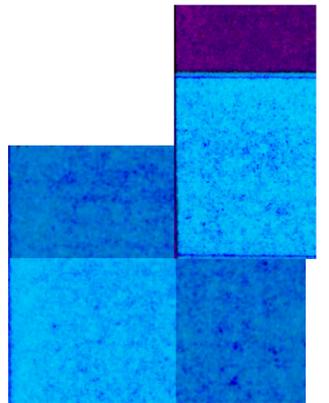
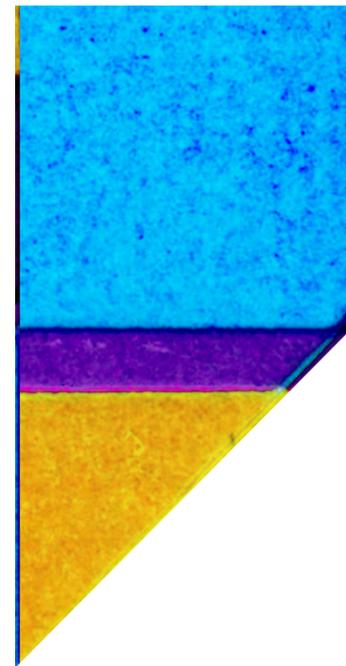
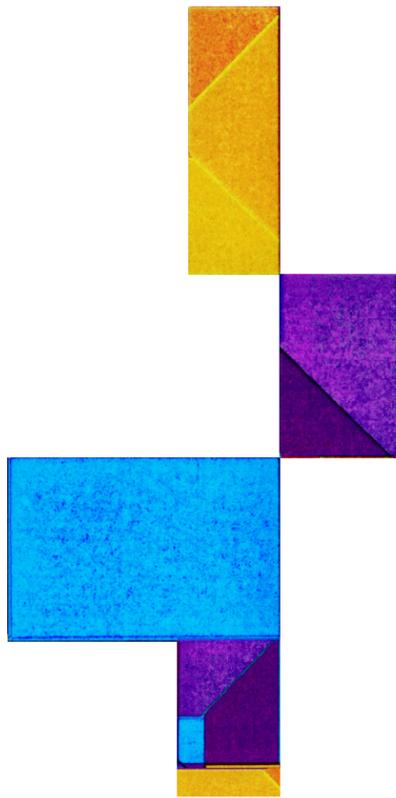
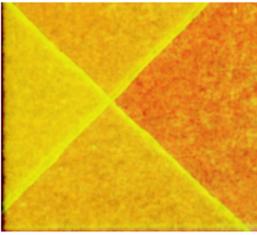
HOLLY MYERS: Why don't we start at the beginning: How did you come to art writing? Did you study art at Scripps? How and why did you make the leap into writing about contemporary art?

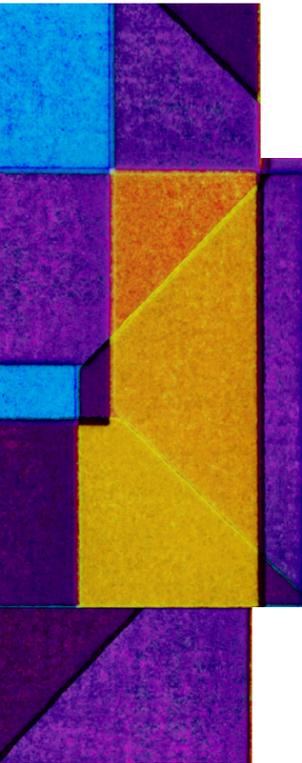
LEAH OLLMAN: I entered Scripps as a studio art major and continued to take art classes until I graduated, but I realized after my first year or two [at Scripps] that I didn't have the drive and latitude to pursue art outside of the classroom. I would write, however, incessantly. It really is how I process experiences, and has been since I was small. ("I go after reality with language," as Saul Bellow's Herzog puts it.) I ended up with a joint major in art history and philosophy. After getting my MA in art history from the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University, I started writing for some art publications while waiting for what I expected to materialize—a curatorial job. Before long, I was hired by the *Times* to write a weekly column for its San Diego County edition. And off I went, covering museum and gallery shows, public art debacles, the evolution of the local scene, and the movements of its various players. It suited me. One week I would be reviewing a new video installation, and the next, interviewing a curator of East Asian art about the collection she oversaw. It was an ongoing exercise in thinking critically and writing clearly. I had become impatient with academic writing while in graduate school—it was the 1980s, and theory was all the rage. As a reader, I hungered for more lucidity, and when I started working for a general-interest newspaper, I got the chance to practice a form of art writing that favors more liveliness and accessibility. The San Diego edition of the paper folded after I'd been there six years, and now most of what I cover for the *Times* is contemporary work shown in L.A. I enjoy writing about work that is not so recent, too, and I write for catalogues and magazines as well. Every review or feature poses a fresh challenge, an opportunity to learn something about what I see and also how I see. I'm always aiming to give readers a way in, through my own personal response and the issues or questions it raises. Which came first for you, writing fiction or criticism?

HM: Well, in theory, the fiction came first, though in practice the criticism did. I've always written stories. But I went into college as a studio art major and, like you, grew smitten with art history along the way. Like you, I write to make sense of things, and writing about art seemed the natural progression. I too was quickly disenchanted with academic writing and relished the on-the-ground immediacy and accessibility of newspaper criticism, particularly in Los Angeles, where so much is happening. It seems much more challenging and worthwhile to me to try to explain something complicated in accessible terms than to explain something obvious in complicated terms, which is what a lot of academic writing—well, the worst of it anyway—does. I continued to pursue the creative writing alongside the criticism, even if it wasn't as often published (novels take a long time!). But the tension between the two grew more problematic over the years, until about four years ago I chose to stop writing criticism altogether. I came to feel that the conditions of freelance journalism—the urban environment, the frequent deadlines, the low pay and constant scrambling for work—were disastrous for creative writing, at least for me. Journalism requires one to be engaged, to be active, to be up on things and analytical. Fiction requires quiet, remove, and contemplation. For me, the needs of the latter won out. Where do you see the creative playing into your career trajectory? Do you see criticism itself as creative work? (Of course it is.) Or does the creative fulfillment lie in engaging with the work of others? I know you've recently completed a book. How does that project relate to—or diverge from—your journalistic work?

LO: Yes! Criticism is creative work, and what's considered creative work shares some fundamental traits with

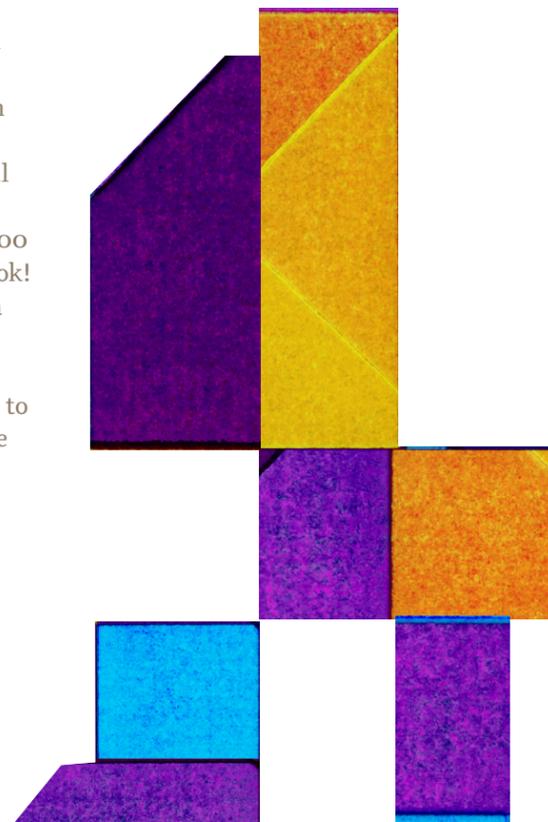
criticism. Both necessitate engagement, as you mentioned, independence of mind, and deep receptivity. Whether you're an artist or a critic, you're practicing discernment, paying close attention to your own process, gorging on opportunities to observe, and continually articulating what matters to you and why. The book I've been working on is not quite done, but done enough for me to be looking for a publisher.



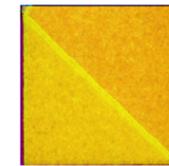


Its working title is *Ensnaring the Moment: On the Intersection of Poetry and Photography*. So many deeply gratifying things in my life trace back to Scripps, and this project is no exception. The seed was planted in a class [Professor of French] Eric Haskell taught on book illustration, where we studied the relationship of image and text. Fast forward 30 years to a lunchtime lecture I gave on campus, where I first test-drove some of the ideas that became central to the book, namely that many common impulses drive poetry and photography: the contraction of time, the distillation and compression of experience, the preservation of a moment. The book joins my thoughts on the affinity between these two media, with an exhilarating array of poems written over the past hundred years that respond to particular photographs or to aspects of the photographic. Unlike any journalistic work I've done, this project started with no fixed points—no designated outlet, audience, shape, length, or expected tone. I just started out curious about something and kept following the thread. It was liberating and invigorating (daunting, too) to be able to go in any direction I wanted, to derive such momentum from the process alone, rather than the ostensible rewards of an “end product.” That risk feels of a different order, and maybe, if it isn't too presumptuous to say, more akin to what you face writing fiction. You write essays, as well, and I wonder what you feel about such slower-paced, thoughtful forms, when the cultural powers-that-be are doing everything possible to shave away at our attention span. Is writing anything but snappy blog posts now an act of resistance? **HM:** Ha,

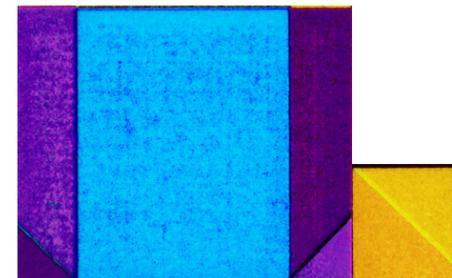
I would say yes to that! I know there's a lot of good that's come from blogging and other short-form digital platforms in recent years, but I've always been wary of them, personally. It seems to me that one should be suspicious of anything that reduces the complexity of the world into bite-sized pieces, however satisfying they might be. I'm also increasingly fed up with this climate of constant, up-to-the-minute chatter, where everything of importance needs to be chewed up, analyzed, and spit out onto the Internet (or the pages of newspapers, or cable news) right this minute. It erodes the attention span, as you say, as well as discourages the work required for real critical thinking. I'm reading Hannah Arendt right now, the political philosopher. Her work is difficult and slow and time-consuming and—well, just about the very opposite of snappy. She took nearly 600 pages to get her head around totalitarianism, and that's only one book! But her thinking is so thorough, so complex, and profound. It feels a privilege just to watch her mind work. It's people like her I am increasingly drawn to: who think seriously and deeply and take the time to write well. That may be getting a little off track, but it's just to say that yes, I think the dangerous, open-ended territory beyond the



blog post—or beyond the 800-word review, as crucial as those are to the broader discussion of contemporary art—is where the real potential lies. That said, it can be incredibly difficult. I am working on a series of essays, as you say, and I think they're about the hardest thing I've ever done. Stepping out into nowhere-land every single morning, where you're not quite sure what you're saying or if it's at all worthwhile or if there will be anyone there to care if you ever finish—it's rough. Do you find working that way—on your book, I mean—has changed the way you approach journalism? Do you find the limitations of journalism more frustrating, as I did? Or has it helped to clarify what purpose the reviews serve? **LO:** Would that I had those 800 words you speak of! The reviews I write



usually run less than 500 words. For me, that limitation is more of a challenge, or even a taunt, than a frustration. Within that tight little space, I try for something distilled, but not reductive. Obviously, there isn't room to stretch out and do the deep explore, a la Arendt, but that's not an excuse to stay on the surface. I take a lot of inspiration from poetry: make every word matter, and carry multiple loads; shed the extraneous, allow no waste. I do share your aggravation with the pace and relentless flow of commentary out there and fear, too, that the immediate is crowding out the enduring. I'm a strong believer in doing nearly everything the slow way, and that holds especially true for critical writing, since thought evolves over time. The reactive NOW, however interesting, is just one point on a continuum. What I feel about a show, for instance, is likely to change from when I see it to when I sit down to write about it, to when I finish writing about it. Those shifts are telling. Journalistic deadlines can be tight, so that span is necessarily limited. What makes it into print is only ever the record of my response up to that point. So what happens when we're working on projects without those given parameters? Nowhere-land can be bleak, I know. Can we take perverse comfort in the knowledge that whatever we create will be, invariably, inescapably, a rough draft? ❁



In addition to writing for the *Los Angeles Times*, **Ollman** is a corresponding editor for *Art in America* and has authored numerous catalogue essays as well as publications, including *Camera as Weapon: Worker Photography Between the Wars* (1991) and *Alison Rossiter: Expired Paper* (2017).

Myers, a graduate of Yale University and art critic at the *Los Angeles Times* from 2000 to 2013, is the author of a forthcoming collection of stories titled *A Cylindrical Object on Fire in the Dark*, due out this fall through Insert Blanc Press.

