

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

When the fun is at its height it's time to go. — Irish proverb

Having championed Gary Indiana's critical faculties in the September issue of this magazine, I was slightly alarmed for both of us when I was asked to introduce the following essay. I hadn't seen much of his writing since he stopped covering art for *The Village Voice*, back in 1988. But I did love the *Voice* column and I'd begrudge anyone else's claim to love it more.

Indiana's art writing for the *Voice* had a gorgeous, chic nihilism just below its shimmering surface. For three years, his adjectivally sequined essays simultaneously caught and refracted the variable lighting of the art world in its halcyon '80s autumn. Most of the time, Indiana made it all seem like a careless, tipsy salon—the world as an overturned wine glass spinning and spilling madly over a table set for a gluttonous buffet.

As a writer who had to meet a weekly deadline, Indiana had little time for reflection and no time for second-guessing. To get around those handicaps, he tended to avoid last-wording exhibitions and artists in favor of ambient essays that cumulatively tell us more about the temper of the culture than about the merchandise on display. He avoided the clichés that afflict most weekly review writing by somehow finding his way to issues larger than whatever was on his weekly critical menu.

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seemed to have parents, or a past more distant than last night's swell party, or a future beyond the swell party this evening and the disillusioned book he would write tomorrow." There was in Indiana's column a consistent self-awareness of possessing insider information. He was no nun of art, assiduously avoiding those he chronicled. No, Indiana wrote with a real delight, and occasionally a horror, in being exactly where he wanted to be—dead center—in the community he had temporarily adopted. Being there led to problems (things could get way too personal) but it also kept the essays bristlingly alive (about the art and the artists who made it). Often, his colleagues' and competitors' assessments of the same material felt as if they were telegraphed in from a chautauqua circuit where culture was a placebo, not a goad.

In Indiana's '80s, for a megasecond, artists and writers and curators and dealers and collectors could all experience the delirious, cardiac anxiety of, say, Alexander Haig's maniacal lunge for commander-in-chief after the assassination attempt on Ronald Reagan. Indiana always knew the '80s art world was a sham, but he kept the wind at his back and caught the current and, as often as not, soared. Still, read closely, the work of his last year was animated by an awful, weary loathing. Indiana was caught between loving the light that played on the iceberg and knowing full well that the iceberg was tearing apart the boat on which he sailed.

—RICHARD FLOOD

To tell you the truth, I've avoided any prolonged retrospective glance at my art-writing career since it ended. I fell into art criticism late in 1983 and jumped out of it in 1988, and my subsequent lack of engagement with the art world has been more or less total—a catalogue here and there when it's something I really do get hot for, but otherwise, silence. Several efforts have been made to collect my writings from that period, all instigated from outside, and I have always had mixed feelings about these efforts, mainly because other people seem to like that work more than I do. When I washed my hands of the art scene, I experienced a long period of revulsion against the little-big world I'd charted in its years of maximum exacerbation. Its present lack of frenzy has given that faraway time an improbable quality, like a long fever that finally dips to a stable temperature. I am no longer revulsed, but living on the other side of things.

Anyway, that career, which I always regarded as temporary, divides into two periods: first the end of '83 and the entirety of '84, when I wrote several long essays for *Art in America*, mainly on artists of the '50s, '60s, and earlier; and then March 1985 to I think June of 1988, when I wrote almost every week, in sickness and in health, for *The Village Voice*.

In the *Art in America* period I developed a fluency of critical vocabulary. I was not an art historian but I have always been a quick study, and the perusal of several art magazines convinced me that I could think as well as, and certainly write better than, the art critics working at the time. These writers often had something urgent to say, but were not always able to formulate it in transparent language. I view that as a writerly failing rather than an achievement. Not that what one has to say has to be simple, but people will read you more willingly if they understand you. Writers who don't want to be understood are deluded fakes, or just bad writers.

In the years I'd been hanging around artists, I'd soaked up their concerns without knowing it; and of course I shared their temperament, since my main interests were in the theater, in writing fiction, and to a lesser extent in working on movies. So I was often able to figure out what an artist was up to, and to give it language. I was, or could be at times, a Method actor critic.

Incidentally, I had to *live* on the meager income from those early days. I did not have a trust fund, and I was rather tardy in discovering that most of the people I knew did. If I was prolific, it was because I needed the money, and lacked the agility at careerism that many writers my age parlayed into high-paying magazine jobs, screenwriting jobs, etc. That's just a talent I lacked, and one that I'm still trying to cultivate in early middle age.

At the time, it was rather fun to make money writing about art. When I was offered Roberta Smith's job at *The Village Voice*, New York's "alternative" weekly newspaper, that looked like it might be fun too. I didn't think it would last; neither did anyone else. It lasted about a year longer than I wanted it to.

One thing that immediately bothered me, and that no advice could have prepared me for, was the fact that I almost always had to write about "the new," which, at the time, practically every artist in New York was desperate to establish him- or herself as. Between 1985 and 1988 there

were fortunes to be made out of a rather narrow band of collectors eager to snap things up at bargain prices, to get in on the ground floor, etc. I met these collectors and was amazed by their craving for novelty—they seemed to be constantly scouring artists' lofts and galleries, and throwing lavish dinner parties. How did they have the time to make money? The art world felt to me like a hot-air balloon that would eventually burst. I said that once at a symposium and was instantly accused of wishing people ill. I didn't wish anyone ill, but I did get a little nauseous watching certain people inflate. I think in the '80s one constantly sensed the blind side of inexorable historical forces: the insensible need, for instance, for one or two artists to be "great," to represent their era, to have their moments of glory consolidated into permanence by the vast institutional machinery of museums. (I especially distrusted Museum People, the worst-of-the-worst bureaucrats and nonentities—except when they weren't.) The artists that got picked may in the end have been perfectly appropriate, but I thought this reflected the shittiness of the period more than any "greatness."

Because the *Voice* and the *New York Times* ran the only reviews that appeared while shows were still hanging, each had an unseemly amount of power—the power to make people talk about specific artists, shows, galleries. This talk would steer the money to a particular location. I worked hard to make the writing lively, and often went overboard poking fun at people, which I knew provided the art world with its favorite dessert, gossip. I tried to skewer only people who obviously deserved it, and who, for the most part, couldn't be harmed by it, except in their egos, which were way too big to begin with. I fucked up a few times, thinking I was doing something clever, but actually venting malice—not a good emotion to work from as a rule, but let's not pretend that criticism can ever be divorced from the pathology of the person writing it. Fortunately, I never seemed to have the same pathology operating from one week to the next.

From week to week, I tried to take the art I was seeing seriously, on its own terms, but also to measure it against the wider world, and this upset people a good deal. Often the artists themselves were impatient with notices more complex and less exalting than the customary mush-mouthed rave, though most appreciated the truth of Ross Bleckner's bon mot, "Ink is ink." The unavoidable problem always was that writing about an individual's art fed into the cult of the proper name. Once the name became well-known, the ideas behind it became illegible and irrelevant. Because the underlying ideas were, in the end, so beside the point of

the art world as a social phenomenon, I felt that there was only an ephemeral sense of community in that *crush* of '80s art-consumption, one that would vanish as soon as the merry-go-round stopped and the bank accounts froze in place. Surprise, it did.

The irritation people sensed in the column was mainly produced by the circus of importunity, and the craving for art stardom, that I had to deal with week after week. Artists and dealers had myriad subtle strategies for getting my attention. I always felt bad for the artists, good and bad, who hadn't mastered the art of dissembling ambition: they would just blatantly get my unlisted phone number and call me up, beg me to come to their studio, write about them, anything. The clumsier and more craven they were the worse I felt for them. I recognized in them the naïveté and idealism I had lost: the sense that virtue or talent or good intentions should provide their own reward, that the prize goes to the best instead of to the best hustler.

The worst feeling was to walk into an opening and know that everyone felt they had to be nice to me, and that only the most resigned-but-maniacal losers would march up and insult me. Not that I craved insult by any means, but I came to despise the shrewd calculation that led so many people who disliked me to manipulate my sympathies. Obviously people were playing for big stakes, I understood that, but I also understood that we're all going to spend eternity in the same dirt. Maybe it's simply a matter of temperament. I've never been able to spend ten minutes in the company of anyone I truly couldn't stand without giving it away. The late critic Paul Taylor once told me, at one of those interminable Art Dinners at Il Cantinori, "You're the only person I know who can palpably turn his back on somebody while you're still looking them in the face." Actually Paul was pretty good at that too.

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Everyone wants to be loved for herself and not for her golden hair, and before I’d put in too many weeks at the *Voice* even I, normally so starved for affection, began to recognize the difference between a genuine interest in me and a ferocious interest in what I could do for people. The fact that I could do a great deal for people that I could not do for myself—lift them, practically overnight, out of bohemian poverty into a life of financial security (of course it wasn’t just me, but I helped)—naturally took its toll, as did the many overtures of friendship I rejected out of suspicion, as well as certain friendships I did make in good faith with people who dropped me the minute I dropped the column. I could name them here to provide a little frisson, but on second thought I owe them thanks for unintentionally providing insights into the stratagems of venality.

This doesn’t tell you much about criticism, but then I never wrote criticism in quite the same spirit that others did. For me, a weekly column was a narrative challenge, also a descriptive one. When I first tried to write novels, in my 20s, I was so self-absorbed, so indifferent to the external world, that I could never remember what a character was wearing, or what color his

eyes were, or what the room looked like; as an art critic, my secret agenda was to learn how to enjoy describing the look of things, the plasticity of objects, and to place things in context. So I could never describe a painting without talking about the space it was in, the people who passed in and out, the press release, the garni—it was all one thing, and ended up a sample chapter of a novel I would someday write. So what looked like a flirtatious involvement with post-Modern theory was really a selfish exercise in writing.

In any case, in the '80s, the scene had become the subject. You couldn't look at all that money, all that fame, all that expenditure gurgling up before your eyes and pretend the only significant part was this static object on the wall. Even formalist critics found that they ignored the procession of vanities around the object at the risk of their credibility. I think I probably caused a lot of people who weren't as familiar with English, or with reality, as I was to make a big fuss over their own metacritical cogitations—I'm thinking of one critic who launched a polemic about me by asking, "What's eating Gary Indiana?" (The better question would have been, "Who's eating Gary Indiana?"—at the time, nobody very thrilling.) The piece went on to bemoan the fact that by 1987 I had become "obsessed by AIDS," an obsession that came to be shared by the rest of the art world a year or so later.

I like to think I brought a breath of scandal, suspense, and fresh air to a period and a place, that I punctured a few follies and got things better than right at least part of the time, and I especially like to think I bailed out at exactly the right moment—that leisurely half hour before the aircraft hit the ground.

Gary Indiana's third novel, Rent Boy, is being published this month by Serpent's Tail/High Risk Rooks of New York and London.



GARY INDIANA

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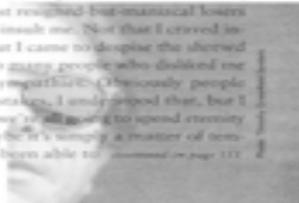
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PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFFREY MAYER

positive images. Just as he's never trafficked in class romance, Leigh doesn't shy away from difficult women (notably in *Abigail's Party*, 1977), even if he is vague in *Naked* as to why "women still do allow things to happen." (On the other hand, *Hard Labour*, one of his grimmest pictures, could serve as a cinematic companion to English's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*.)

Leigh may think Johnny a comprehensible "receptacle of cares and worries and preoccupations" about the late 20th century, but he's an unstable receptacle nevertheless. Leigh drops clues as to why Johnny is off-balance (in the repeated references to his mother, for one) but never spins effects into causes. That's one reason why the character of Jeremy (Graig Cruttswell)—Johnny's wealthy, chortling analogue, a capitalist/broker who harks French into his cellular phone—exists in the first place. (Leigh considers Jeremy "undeniably worse" than Johnny.) Successful or not, Leigh's unexceptional class one-upmanship is essentially as much a dodge as Johnny's riff on 666, the European bar code, and prophecy.

Indeed, the not-so-secret heart of *Naked* is the loose community of women Johnny enters and exits. His encounters with the various women in their various rooms—his curious spatial choreography—is the most poignant instance of the film's controlling image of exodus and delirium. That the women can scarcely keep up with his wild discursive flights is finally beside the point; after all, what's the point of all that fast talk when Johnny himself can't listen? The crucial exception to this tongue-mel company is Louise, the lone woman who speaks Johnny's language and the one, in turn, to whom he listens. Leigh puts it another way: "Finally, there is love."

Johnny's incursions in and out of the women's rooms and through the streets of London are neither existential larks nor instances of sexual-space-as-destiny, but rather a pained and painful refusal of, and departure from, the only knowable community that might have welcomed him. Brian's warning—"Don't waste your life"—and Louise's counsel fall on deaf ears. Johnny talks but he doesn't hear; his words belong to a voice outside discourse, hermetically swaddled in false presence. In *Naked*, individual consciousness takes a beating, and the lonely walker, no longer cloaked in a mantle of seductive, romantic, tragic isolation, is finally and inexorably stripped bare. □

Maxine Dargis lives in New York.

1. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, 1973, paperback ed. Oxford: the University Press, 1973, p. 238.
2. Ibid., p. 239.
3. Mike Leigh, quoted in Steve Hobbins, "Leigh's Moral Dimension for British Cinema," *The Morning Star*, 24 February 1975, p. 104.

INDIANA (Continued from page 41)

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In any case, in the '80s, the scene had become the subject. You couldn't look at all that money, all that fame, all that expeditious gargling up before your eyes and postured the only significant part was this static object on the wall. Even formalist critics found that they ignored the procession of vanities around the object at the risk of their credibility. I think I probably caused a lot of people who weren't as familiar with English, or with reality, as I was to make a big fuss over their own metacritical cogitations—I'm thinking of one critic who launched a polemic about me by asking, "What's eating Gary Indiana?" (The better question would have been, "Who's eating

Gary Indiana?—at the time, nobody very thrilling.) The piece went on to bemoan the fact that by 1987 I had become “obsessed by AIDS,” an obsession that came to be shared by the rest of the art world a year or so later.

I like to think I brought a breath of scandal, suspense, and fresh air to a period and a place, that I punctured a few follies and got things better than right at least part of the time, and I especially like to think I hailed out at exactly the right moment—just leisurely half hour before the aircraft hit the ground. □

Gary Indiana's first novel, *Dear John*, is being published this month by Scribner's Touchstone Book Division of New York and London.

O'BRIEN (continued from page 87)

since I was manipulating the sessions for my own purposes, I wasn't really being passive. Actually I found the experience liberating, in the sense that when there's nothing left to hide, you can move on. It was like getting rid of a secret.

GO'B: Do you think women should serve in combat?

KS: I find it kind of funny that this issue should be such a barometer of liberal views: decades ago, liberals were against combat. But I guess if women want to fight in wars, let 'em.

GO'B: Do you think gays should serve on submarines?

KS: Yeah.

GO'B: Then you disagree with the President?

KS: He doesn't think they should serve on submarines?

GO'B: No, the bunks are too close together.

KS: What do you think?

GO'B: I think if gays want to be in the military they should join the Marines. They'd be proud if they had their own service. They'd be competitive.

KS: Why the Marines?

GO'B: There seem to be a lot of gay Marines anyway. Their slogan is “We're looking for a few good men.” Do you have any unusual skills or talents?

KS: Finding and killing bugs and hailing cabs are my two good skills.

GO'B: What about talents?

KS: I think I have talent as a poet. And I can draw well.

GO'B: Do you practice poetry?

KS: It's something I did in college.

GO'B: Are you right-handed or left-handed?

KS: Right-handed.

GO'B: Are you a registered voter?

KS: I'm a registered Democrat.

GO'B: Have you ever had an out-of-body experience?

KS: No.

GO'B: Do you believe in reincarnation?

KS: No.

GO'B: Do you have recurring dreams?

KS: No.

GO'B: Tell me a dream you remember.

KS: [Extremely long pause] I was crossing an avenue, going to a shrink appointment, and it was flooded. Therapy was like an art-school critique with the shrink being the teacher. There were various artists there. At one point the shrink was talking about L's work, saying how good it was, using the word “this,” meaning it had no excess, it was beautifully economic. The only problem was L's inability to talk about it, I said. That's okay, that can be learned. It's better for it to work visually than verbally. I asked if the teacher/shrink could come to my studio because my work was too big to bring in. I had some disappointment about not being adequately critiqued. Then I was sitting in a bar drinking Diet Coke with the shrink/teacher. We were having a fun, flirtatious conversation. I was thinking he would have liked more but for the prohibitions of the therapeutic relationship. It was as if we were on a date getting drunk together. I couldn't remember the name of the avenue that was flooded. Then I remembered: it was Second Avenue.

GO'B: Do you have any pets?

KS: Not now. Growing up I had lots of cats. And then lots of dogs.

GO'B: Do you have plants?

KS: No, just stuffed animals.

GO'B: What's your favorite article of clothing?

KS: I have a long black dress I like, but that will change. I go through favorites; they last about a week. I don't have a deep commitment to clothes.

GO'B: What about shoes?

KS: I think shoes are important and wonderful, but I hate buying them and I often wind up buying shoes that are too small or too big. I have one pair that worked out well last year, sort of platform loafers. Very all-purpose.

GO'B: Are there any secrets that you live by?

KS: It's necessary to be slightly underemployed.

GO'B: Do you want to hear your horoscope for today?

KS: Yeah.

GO'B: Career prospects grow brighter. Pursue ambitions fearlessly. If you haven't any clearly defined goals, get some. □

Glen O'Brien is a contributing editor to *Artforum* magazine and a former stand-up comedian. He edited *Madame's* for a time and is creative director of advertising at Barney's, New York. He is drawn with Agnieszka Hryn.

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— Gary Indiana with an introduction by Richard Flood

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