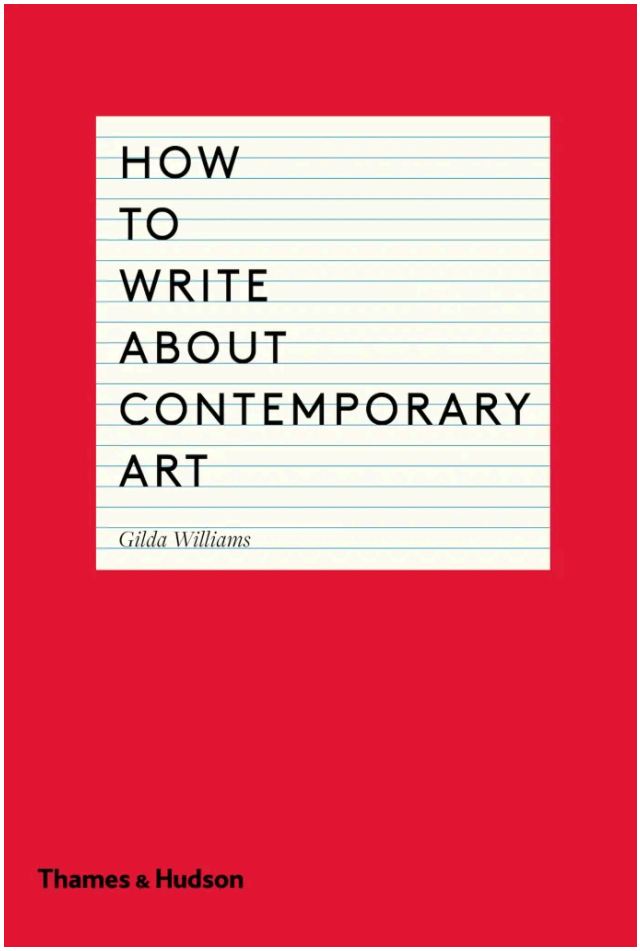
HYPERALLERGIC

The ABC of Art Criticism: Some Recent How To's

Louis Bury August 29, 2015



It has often been said that writing about art is like dancing about architecture. Nearly as often, it has also then been said: *But I'm going to do it anyway*. Whether or not the dance analogy captures all the futilities and elations of the endeavor, writing about art, experience proves, is an activity unlikely to abate. Indeed, as art's institutional and popular reach has grown ever more expansive in the early 21st century, the proliferation of adjunct written discourses has perhaps never been greater. When everyone is an artist, everyone is also eventually pressed into service as an art writer.

Of course, just as not every artist is a *good* artist, not every art writer is a good or even serviceable art writer. Both enterprises require more than simply the latent human capacity for creativity or critical thought; they require training, experience, and great quantities of effort and

consideration. But the quippish dance analogy misleads by suggesting that the futility of art writing derives from a fundamental incommensurability between language and image, rather than from lack of chops on the part of the writer. Plenty of art writing may seek to clarify and exhilarate, but the problem remains that expertise in art doesn't guarantee facility in writing.

Gilda Williams's admirably practical and instructive 2014 primer, ***How to Write About Contemporary Art***, addresses this and other art writing disparities. "As the readership swells and the need for communicative art-writing skyrockets," she laments in her introduction, "much contemporary art-writing remains barely comprehensible." Good art writing, she emphasizes repeatedly, begins with good art-knowledge; however, because "art writing is among this industry's poorest paid jobs, […] fairly advanced art-writing tasks are [often] assigned to its least experienced and recognized members." Williams argues, compellingly, that this structural incongruity accounts for much of the "indecipherable art-speak" that rankles readers of art writing rather than, as is commonly supposed, a bent for pretentious mystification on the part of art world insiders.

Accessible, well-organized, and example-rich, *How to Write* provides a welcome refresher course for writers who might not have known they need one. Most how-to books about art writing are pitched toward students, but Williams tilts hers more toward early career arts professionals, who occupy the sweet spot of knowing just enough about art and about writing — but not so much — that they're liable to get themselves into trouble. She relies on the catch-all convenience of the term "art writer" over more specific terms like critic, blogger, historian, gallerist, or journalist, and the book's ambit reflects the term's capaciousness. Structured into three sections — "Why Write about Contemporary Art," "How to Write about Contemporary Art," and "How to Write Contemporary Art Formats" — the book contains material that will be relevant to newer art writers whatever their particular concerns.

More experienced writers will also pick up pointers, or at least reminders, about craft, such as Williams's injunction against what she calls "yeti's": "Janus-faced" descriptive waffles such as "bold yet subtle" and "comforting yet disquieting." Craft-focused points such as this are illustrated through an abundance of excerpted examples, sixty-four in total, including the penultimate chapter's brilliant conceit to compare the workings of multiple short texts, each in a different genre, about Sarah Morris. And the book's opening sections, which consider the wherefores and whys of art writing, in particular a lively overview of "where art criticism came from," serve as sanguine reminders of why we look at and write about art in the first place. All told, the book can act as a smelling salt for the already-initiated: what had been routinized becomes conscious and newly compelling. Like good art, the book, however basic, inspires you to want to write your own criticism.

Williams clearly loves the craft of criticism (which she helpfully groups under the category of "evaluative" art writing, in contradistinction to "explanatory" art writing such as press releases and wall texts). Rather than rag on examples of unfortunate critical prose, a cheap and pessimistic spectator sport, she smartly confines her excerpted examples to writing she admires, even adores. Criticism, it hardly needs be said, is not often adored. It typically gets regarded in the same way as sports officiating: taken for granted when it does its job well, scorned when it makes a mistake. Considerations of criticism as a craft in its own right, and not just a pawn on the chessboard of artistic fame, are therefore most welcome. "Writing that attempts to match art's own dare," Williams calls it, inspired.

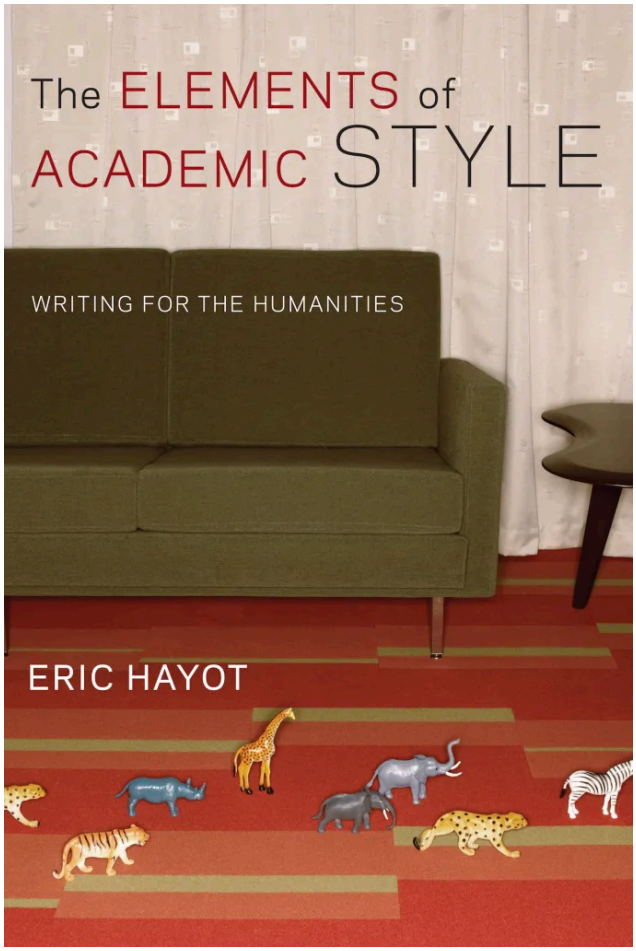
Of all the art criticism that inspires Williams, she is most excited by writing that takes risks, critico-fiction in particular. A hybrid of criticism and fiction that aspires to the status of art in its own right, critico-fiction is a recently named genre that includes art writing tour de forces such as Chris Kraus' *I Love Dick* (1997), Lynne Tillman's *This Is Not It* (2002), and Raphael Rubinstein's *The Miraculous* (2014), among others. More than any other art writing genre, critico-fiction most resembles a dance about architecture in that the work of art, its ostensible subject, is more a jumping off point for the writer's own flights of fancy than an object of sustained description and analysis. Indeed, you could say that critico-fiction takes the descriptive difficulties of art writing as its animating condition: if ekphrasis always falls short of the actual experience of the artwork, why bother with description at all, why not dance, ecstatically, instead.

Still, for all its ecstasies, critico-fiction seems a tad too narrow a label for the kind of adventurous art writing Williams has in mind, given that she also admires performative art writing that is non-fictional in nature, such as the lyric rhapsodies of Wayne Koestenbaum or the more fantastical strains of "philosophy [that exists] at the intersection of art and literature." Calling the genre something like creative criticism would be more usefully inclusive.

Whatever you want to call the genre, the fascinating thing about its role in the book is that, in the midst of object lessons about the ABCs of criticism, Williams alludes, again and again, and beamingly, to this master class of imaginative art writing. "The finest examples [of it]," she raves, "can reflect a level of preparation, imaginative thinking, and rigor in writing technique unmatched in more conventional art-writing." It is far from uncommon for an introductory primer to gesture toward the more advanced topics in the field while acknowledging that their intricacies lie outside the book's purview. "A hypothetical chapter 'How to Write Critico-Fiction'," Williams believes, "would be the art-writing equivalent of 'How to Make Art'" and, as such, impossible to write.

But it *is* uncommon for the primer to pine for the undiscussed advanced topic in the way *How to Write* does. Behind this book about the fundamentals of criticism stands an as-yet unwritten one about a shadow tradition of creative criticism that, protestations of impossibility aside, you get

the sense Williams would very much like to write. This ecstatic longing does not detract from *How to Write*'s back-to-basics focus, but it does reveal that Williams' sympathies as a critic are as bold as the best art. For her, the reason to master discursive conventions is not simply to communicate better, but also to transcend milquetoast standards of communication.



In Eric Hayot's excellent 2014 primer, ***The Elements of Academic Style***, discursive mastery is, despite assertions to the contrary, closer to being an end in itself, a game whose rules you must learn so that you can play it with greater acumen, polish, and flair. Subtitled "Writing For The Humanities" but most directly applicable to graduate students and early career professionals in Hayot's native academic disciplines of literary and cultural studies (though art historians will find plenty of value here, too), the book is a comprehensive, incisive, and staggeringly overdue guide to writing humanistic scholarship, as well as an urgent institutional critique of how writing gets taught in humanities Ph.D. programs. Written in assured, engaging prose, possessed of personality but not overbearing, *The Elements* should be required reading for everybody — students, faculty, even administrators — in the orbit of a humanities Ph.D. program.

As a rigorous book-length consideration of a topic that *How to Write* treats in twenty quick pages, *The Elements* throws into relief the former's main shortcoming: in trying to be everything to everybody, it risks not being much of anything to anybody. *The Elements*, in contrast, can safely assume a shared institutional and discursive context among its readership, which allows for greater focus and depth. Both books, however, are subject to the "paradox" that Williams claims

“haunts” her book: they are “introductory primer[s] for an intensely specialized and complex job.” Calling it a haunting paradox overstates the situation but the underlying point is a good one: art writing and humanistic scholarship are complex, challenging endeavors that attract the kind of person who looks down upon 101-level simplicities. Scholars, especially, are the kind of difficulty-positive people apt to jump straight into the deep end of the pool as a way to teach themselves how to swim.

Hayot implies that many scholarly careers drown as a result. “The difference between those who ‘succeed’ and ‘fail’ in the profession,” he contends, “has as much to do with luck and mentoring as it has to do with ability or hard work.” Talent and ambition are not in short supply in humanities Ph.D. programs; the obstacles to success are more often structural in nature. The increasing scarcity of full-time academic teaching positions, perhaps the biggest structural obstacle, has been well-documented. Hayot focuses instead on a subtler stumbling block: how the training that doctoral students receive in writing is haphazard at best and oftentimes detrimental. Absent rigorous formal training, students must figure things out as writers through instinct, emulation, trial and error. The ones who happen to reinvent, gaspingly, the breaststroke are the ones whose careers remain afloat

This institutional critique receives its most pointed articulation in Hayot’s bleak appraisal of the seminar paper, the most commonly assigned and practiced Ph.D. form and the subject of Williams’ chapter on academic writing. Not only do “the patterns and practices of the seminar paper bear no resemblance to the ways professors write,” they can also, Hayot argues, inculcate counterproductive psychological and rhetorical habits. A published academic article undergoes a year-long “complex and iterative series of thinking, writing, and revision” that in no way resembles the three-week scramble to meet the page length requirements of multiple seminar papers. The form and content of the two modes seem similar but are actually quite distinct: the amount of research involved, the amount and type of citations used, and the types of readings performed all differ significantly. “The [academic] article,” Hayot avers, “is simply a different genre [than the seminar paper].”

Hayot is equally sharp in his writing pointers, which comprise the bulk of the book and which encompass both the psychological and the technical aspects of composition. His touchstone technical concept is the “uneven U,” his term for the characteristic shape of the academic paragraph. The uneven U paragraph begins at a relatively high level of conceptual abstraction, delves down into increasing levels of specificity — including, at its most specific, quotation — to substantiate and explore the initial point, then rises back up toward a conclusion that occurs at a slightly higher level of abstraction than where the paragraph began. The concept sounds simple enough — evidence in the middle, ideas on either end — but it has impressive explanatory force

in Hayot's capable hands, becoming a concept not just about paragraph structure but about the fractal elegance of article (and even book) structure.

For all their prescriptive clarity, both books caution that an overly paint-by-numbers approach to writing can quickly become formulaic. "Good art writers," caveats Williams at the outset, "break conventions, hold a few sacrosanct, innovate their own." Likewise, Hayot, when he encourages the reader to "follow these lessons" as though they were "rules" but to recognize that "the final rule is… break the rules!"

"This is a book," he insists, "that wants you to surpass and destroy it." Indeed, Williams' belief that critico-fiction, sui generis, can't be taught reinforces the idea that dutiful rule-following can beget competence but not genius. Like the metaphorical ladder at the end of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, which Wittgenstein says must be kicked away after it has been climbed up, how-to books require, as a genre, gestures toward the free-floating beyond of expressive expertise.

Whereas *How to Write* envisions critical craft becoming art itself on the far side of mastery's horizon, *The Elements* gestures toward a transcendent, rule-breaking beyond but never names it or offers a positive vision of what it would look like. This difference derives from the unique nature of scholarship, a subset of the larger category of criticism which, by virtue of its strict institutional and discursive conventions, can't easily imagine an unconventional beyond that would meaningfully remain scholarship. Thus when Hayot, under influence of the OuLiPo group, recommends that writers experiment with self-imposed constraints, such as the ingenious idea to prohibit oneself use of the verb "to be," he is quick to caution that "[he is] not recommending […] lexical novelty for its own sake" but rather "novelty as a practice of self-awareness and self-renewal," as "sustained engagement with the tools of your craft." Scholarly experimentation, in other words, is expressly not done for purposes of expressivity. Less rigidly specialized forms of criticism have softer rules and thus more potential creative freedom.

That freedom, however, comes at a cost: the anxiety of not knowing for certain how best to exercise it. In contrast to the clearly defined rules of the academy, the relative absence of professional rules in non-academic art writing means that art writers must in a sense invent the rules, the terms of engagement, for their own writings and, especially, for their larger careers. *How to Write* can teach you to write better art criticism but cannot, alas, draw you a roadmap to becoming a professional art writer. *The Elements*, on the other hand, can chart you a path to full professor that looks downright corporate in its comparative surety but cannot teach you any literary dance steps that aren't at least a little squarish.

Ever the hippest critic on the dance floor, Dave Hickey, a favorite of Williams, has said that "the trick of civilization lies in recognizing the moment when a rule ceases to liberate and begins to govern." Each quite valuable to its respective field, these two primers together suggest that, in

criticism's very own written practices (and not just its theories about others' practices), expertise consists in being able to recognize that elusive moment.

How to Write About Contemporary Art *(2014) is published by Thames & Hudson and is available from* ***Amazon*** *and other online booksellers.*

The Elements of Academic Style *(2014)* is published by Columbia University Press and is available from **Amazon** and other online booksellers.
