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Is Art Criticism Getting More Conservative, or Just More Burnt Out?

By *Louis Bury*

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Left to right: art critics Jason Farago, Dean Kissick, and Sean Tatol.
Illustration Daniel Garcia

As a critic myself, I get it. Most art exhibitions aren't amazing. I personally think about gallery-going the way I do thrifting, even though I don't buy art because it's much more expensive than used clothing. At both galleries and thrift stores, I like to poke around in hopes of being pleasantly surprised. Most of what's on display is, by definition, average: a pair of innocuous chinos; an abstract painting that would

look nice above your couch. Some of it's a bit cringe, the art equivalent of a tuxedo T-shirt. And some is interesting but just not your size or style. Only at rare moments, often when the search feels futile, do you stumble upon something incredible: a jacket or a sculpture that feels as though it exists just for you, whose improbability makes the discovery that much more meaningful.

All of which is to say that I'm suspicious whenever other critics complain that most art—or most movies, or most music—is bad these days. Most days, most work isn't incredible. Combing through it all, fatigue is inevitable. But that fatigue causes some critics to mistake the rarity of aesthetic elation for a uniquely humdrum contemporary culture. One sign of this error is rampant nostalgia for the way things used to be—when the critic was younger, or else during an illustrious historical era.

This nostalgia pervades the work of several critics who've been grumbling that contemporary art is stagnant. Sean Tatol's self-published *Manhattan Art Review* tosses off zesty negative reviews that stirred up productive interest in art criticism's stakes throughout 2023. That same year, *New York Times* critic-at-large Jason Farago wrote the civilization-level version of a "kids these days" think piece, "Why Culture Has Come to a Standstill," which argues that aesthetic style no longer advances and that perhaps "ours is the least innovative century for the arts in 500 years." Dean Kissick's polarizing 2024 *Harper's* screed, "The Painted Protest," vents frustration with the curatorial paradigm shifts resulting from 2010s identity politics, and romanticizes the pre-Trump art world of its author's early adulthood.

Art *isn't* what it used to be, in good and bad ways, but every generation experiences a version of this phenomenon as it ages. What stands out about these critical complaints is their frustration toward how the world itself has changed, often in ways hostile to artists. Today's technological and economic conditions exert novel demands on US arts professionals, creating an industry where overwork and precarity are the norm. It's no surprise that artists have adapted to these conditions and it's no surprise, if a bit cliché, that some critics wonder if that means art's best days are behind it.



Illustration Daniel Garcia

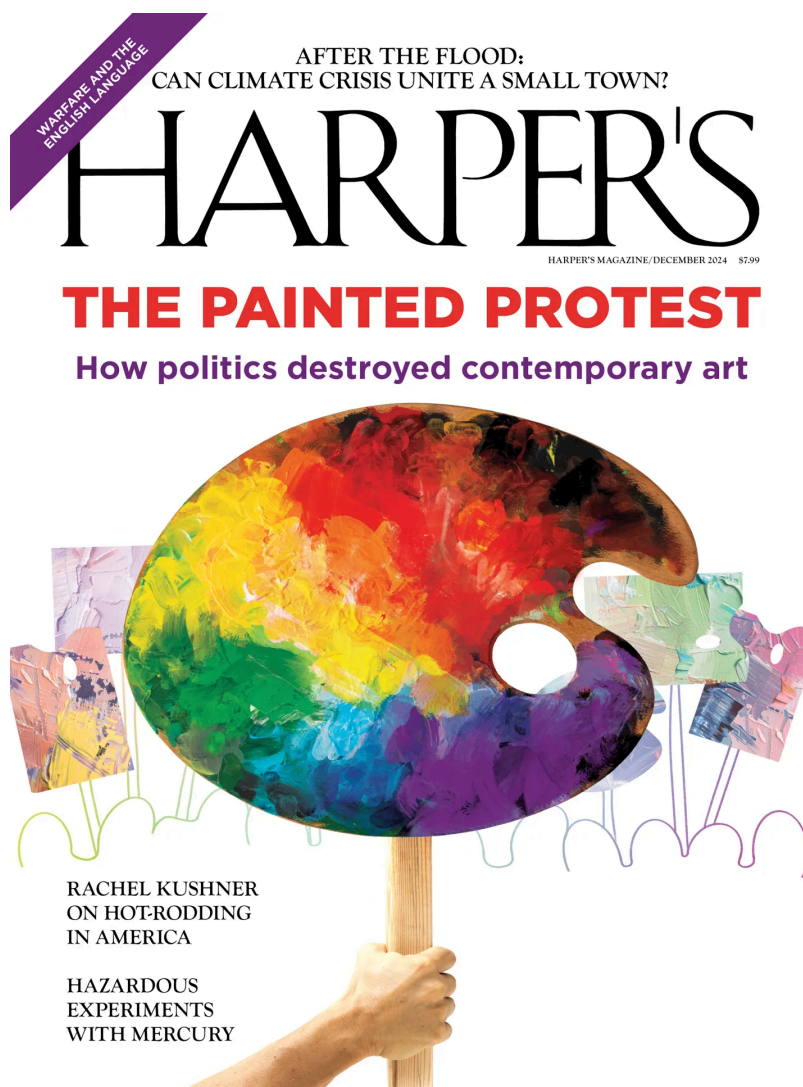
FARAGO'S "WHY CULTURE HAS COME TO A STANDSTILL" argues that Western culture's best days have passed but that, once you accept the fact, you can have a more fulfilling relationship to what remains. The article asks "why cultural production no longer progresses in time as it once did," and answers that phones and other digital tools create so much "chronological confusion" that the concept of aesthetic progress no longer makes sense. Instead, we have "a culture of an eternal present," exemplified by Amy Winehouse's hit 2006 album *Back to Black*, which sounds "neither new nor retro," "as if it came from no particular era."

The argument's premises aren't particularly objectionable; however, the conclusion Farago draws from them is silly. He contends that "the lexical possibilities of many traditional media are exhausted," and thus no major stylistic innovations are possible within them. As a result, he believes audiences ought to let go of the lingering high modernist belief that "good art is good because it is innovative." But you get the feeling Farago is less at peace with his cultural disappointments than he pretends, given that his subsequent reviews continue to dredge up examples of aesthetic stagnation, always linking back to this article.

Part of Farago's complaint is that digital dissemination reduces art to mere content: "In the 20th century we were taught that cleaving 'style' from 'content' was a fallacy, but in the 21st century, content (that word!) has had its ultimate vengeance, as the sole component of culture that our machines can fully understand, transmit and monetize." The digital revolution has had seismic implications for the production and distribution of culture, similar to that of the printing press centuries ago. So it's bizarre—and laughably premature—to speculate, as Farago does, that "we are now almost a quarter of the way through what looks likely to go

down in history as the least innovative, least transformative, least pioneering century for culture since the invention of the printing press.”

What’s actually happening is that culture as Farago knows and prefers it is changing as a result of techno-economic pressures. In recent decades, cultural platforms have undergone transformations even more dramatic than the content they showcase, with profound effects on how and why artists operate: from becoming content creators, to collaborating with AI. As a staff writer for the paper of record, at a time when such jobs are near-extinct and the term “paper of record” feels like an anachronism, Farago is aware of the changing status quo. He just chooses to cling to yesterday’s norms even as he pretends to let them go.



Harper's December 2024 cover

Courtesy Harper's Magazine, New York

Kissick, on the other hand, laments that his youthful optimism about art's potential led to disappointment. Like Farago, Kissick believes contemporary art feels exhausted because it fixates on historically marginalized identities and folk knowledge, especially in major biennials. Also like Farago, he's tired of how art relies on the same type of "spin-offs, remakes, quotations, interpolations, and revivals" omnipresent in the movie, music, and fashion industries. Unlike Farago, Kissick feels less willing to accept a diminished role for art.

When "The Painted Protest" was published in mid-November 2024, shortly after the United States presidential election, everyone had an opinion about it. The piece received recognition for articulating that a cultural moment has passed—the identity politics that predominated as "faith in the liberal order began to fall apart around 2016"—and it received criticism for its tendentiousness and misplaced romanticism. Kissick's characterizations of 2010s cultural liberalism traffic in straw men and overstatements (art "amplify[ing]" historically marginalized voices "shouldn't, it seemed, be inventive or interesting"). But his core argument captures how efforts at greater inclusivity in the fine arts shifted, over the past decade or so, from an institutional critique to the institutional norm. He asks, "When the world's most influential, best-funded exhibitions are dedicated to amplifying marginalized voices, are those voices still marginalized?" And answers that the project of inclusion "has been completed," even "hollowed out into a trope."

This passage's false dichotomy flattens nuances: a voice can be centered by cultural institutions yet remain politically or economically marginalized. But it puts a finger on why the 2020s anti-woke sentiment, though it often lapses into petty grievance, has had counter-hegemonic appeal not just to some arts audiences but also to a segment of the US electorate. These recent tugs-of-war over cultural power, which go back further than Kissick's article acknowledges, feel fraught not only because social media inflames conflict but also because there's so little actual power available to most participants, owing to unequally distributed resources.

OVER THE PAST HALF-CENTURY, US neoliberal austerity has exacerbated pressure on artists, curators, and arts writers, making institutional success feel increasingly zero-sum. At the same time that middle class creative and intellectual career paths have grown more precarious, the costs of housing, health care, and college have risen faster than wage growth. The art market, where idealistic press release rhetoric often runs cover for the machinations of extreme wealth, renders these material disparities conspicuous. For artists and culture workers without a

financial safety net, these conditions discourage taking aesthetic or personal risks and encourage play-it-safe professionalism.

That's why, for all its controversy baiting, the most telling section of "The Painted Protest" is a head-scratching paean to mega-curator Hans Ulrich Obrist, also known as "Hurricane" HUO. Kissick interned for Obrist in 2008 and fondly recalls the latter's frenetic lifestyle: "He circumnavigated the world relentlessly, meeting everyone he could and introducing them to one another, in person or over email on his two BlackBerries, insisting on the urgency of their conversation." Obrist "almost destroyed himself," concludes Kissick, "as a committed early-twenty-first-century citizen should, in an orgy of connectivity." This rose-tinted portrayal feels jarring, given the extent to which Kissick romanticizes the transgressive bohemian freedom of a life in the arts. Yet Obrist's pathological overwork was the prototype for digital hustle culture, for the always-on professionalism that many in the arts today adopt out of financial necessity, a sense of self-importance, or both.

I stopped visiting thrift stores in my 30s, around the same time I started visiting art galleries routinely. In some ways, I substituted one hobby for another; both scratch a similar itch. The lifestyle change was also pragmatic: the more I wrote about art professionally, the less free time I had for other things, and thrifting is an inefficient way to build a wardrobe. In fact, to free up energy in my overscheduled life, I adopted a personal uniform for each season and social or professional occasion. This HUO-style life hack made my days more efficient but also made thrifting for unique items moot.

The physical exhaustion that Obrist normalized laid the groundwork for the aesthetic exhaustion these 2020s critics decry. Culture workers are conditioned to believe they can't get ahead, so they live frenetically, fueled by the fear that they're falling behind. There's more than a little truth to that belief. But it's worth considering the role that overstimulation and burnout plays in declaring so much work uninspiring. Most arts professionals are overworked and underpaid, and confronted, as on dating apps, with a buffet of cultural options whose sheer quantity dulls the luster of every individual possibility.

In this light, the recent curatorial vogue for artistic folk wisdom looks not just like an effort to center the historically marginalized, but also a longing for "simpler," less networked, times and places. Nostalgia for one's youth à la Kissick, or for the great eras in art history à la Farago, might differ in content but not in form. As

Kissick puts it: “Everyone, it seems, wants to escape the present. We just long for different pasts.”

I still long to be pleasantly surprised, but it gets harder as you get older. What would surprise me right now are critics who articulate positive visions of the art world they want to see, rather than grouse about what’s dull or different. But those kinds of articles are harder to write, and receive less attention, than sensationalized negativity. Farago and Kissick, in those aforementioned articles, actually do include lists of their contemporary aesthetic pleasures; Tatol, too, consistently reviews exhibitions he loves (though there are fewer of them than ones he hates). The bright spots in these critics’ fields of vision contravene their gloomy theses about art’s exhaustion. Incredible work still happens, about as often as it always has; our jobs and our phones are creating new obstacles, as well as new opportunities, to make and find it.



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