

# There Will Never Be Another Art Critic Like Peter Schjeldahl

What the late 'New Yorker' art critic meant to me.

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Peter Schjeldahl accepts the Clark Prize, September 10, 2008 in New York City.  
Photo by Jonathan Zeigler/Patrick McMullan via Getty Images.

I knew Peter Schjeldahl. A bit. Enough to write an “I knew Peter Schjeldahl” essay, which I don’t really want to do. But he meant a lot to me, so I want to try to say something about him.

About Peter as a person, I will say is that he was generous to me, in his prickly way. In 2010, long ago now, he wrote me out of the blue about a long essay I had put up for the old Artnet Magazine, a piece that eventually became “The Semi-Post-Postmodern Condition” from my first book. I was stunned by the attention but eventually wrote him back. He told me, “If you can do the same thing in 2,000 words, that’s when you’ll have nailed it”—words I took to heart without being able to pull it off consistently.

We had lunch a few times to talk shop; I went twice to his famous 4th of July fireworks in the Catskills; and he wrote me other notes over the years. Not all of them were praise, exactly. When I wrote something snarky about a silly David Brooks essay about beauty, in which the *Bobos in Paradise* author waxed ponderous about the ballet, Peter wrote to admonish me for cynicism. “I don’t get it—have you seen ballet? It *is* breath-taking.”

I didn’t really take advantage of Peter’s desire to connect until after his cancer diagnosis, after he published “The Art of Dying” essay in the *New Yorker*, because he intimidated me. I found talking to him to be like jumping into a deep pool of cold water—you had to brace yourself for the intensity of the experience, but you also emerged feeling more alive. In conversation, you perceived that the kind of attention he brought to his writing about art was suddenly fixed on you—intense, curious, sensitive, argumentative.

We talked somewhat more often in the last few years. This summer, he wrote to tell me what he liked about my new book, and then, when I didn’t reply immediately, wrote a follow up to demand that I answer for the things he didn’t agree with in it (my political naiveté, essentially). I took it as a sign of affection that he wanted to argue with me.

The thing is, all this personal stuff, that’s sentimental. It is the writing that I should say something about.

The most obvious thing to say about Peter Schjeldahl is that he was a great read. As a former poet, he took language seriously, and as a writer for a weekly magazine, he was economical, saying only exactly what needed to be said—the kind of qualities that the speed and indulgence of internet writing don’t train people in. Over years of reading his *New Yorker* columns, I can remember having these tiny organic epiphanies. *Oh, that is how you use an adjective*, I remember thinking once, reading something of his.

He was wonderful at description that captured the sense of a thing but also infused it with a new thought—and not just about art. Writing of a ferry ride to Randalls Island to report on an art fair, he described the Manhattan skyline as resembling “a congeries of giant’s toys.” The phrase appears in my head every time I gaze across the East River from Brooklyn.

Because he has just died, it is natural to return to “The Art of Dying,” written immediately after he had been given six months to live (a diagnosis that he would defy for two and a half more precious years). It’s a lovely essay, full of wisdom and feeling, in a style that is characteristically vulnerable and hard-bitten, self-critical but self-possessed.

But that essay was, as Peter himself says in it, the first piece of writing he had done for himself in decades, and so uncharacteristic of what made him great. “The Art of Dying” is a deep-depth-of-field essay, where Peter’s thoughts on writing and art are placed in visible relation to the full, wide background of his lived experience. The truth is I prefer the shallow-depth-of-field, workaday Schjeldahl essays, where you feel the crisp quality of his attention on his object.

Every art critic produces an unintentional self-portrait through the things they like. I find it telling that Peter’s favorite painter was not one of the racy romantics or crusading modernists but Velázquez—the consummate professional, the court painter who just rendered what was given to him to paint so well, with such exceptional dash and lucidity, that it is profound.

And I think that was Peter. His columns are the best possible version of the limited assignment that a weekly review is. They are perfectly balanced pieces writing, the art-historical storytelling and oracular description seamlessly jointed together with wry observations about human nature and earnest reporting on the new pleasures he’s uncovered.

Until this last decade, the major art critical contest was between the “thinkers” and the “feelers,” the academics vs. the populists. Peter was obviously squarely on the side of the feelers. In art, he disliked the bracketed and the pedantic (though he was capable of appreciating these qualities when he reconstructed them *as feelings*). “Irony is a breathing apparatus for us middle-class-niks,” he told me when I interviewed him in spring of 2020, “because we are subject to conflicts on every level.”

But that line is itself a very precise piece of social-psychological observation, with far-reaching evaluative implications. His columns are full of these—which is to say that he

was full of thoughts as much as of feelings. Peter thought deeply, probably constantly, about what he did. As esteemed as he was, I still hold that Peter is underrated as a contributor to art discourse, because his elegance and professionalism obscure the profundity of his lessons.

Some years ago, I was at a conference on art and politics where a speaker read out, in disgust, a line from Peter's positive review of the painter John Currin. The piece stated that Currin's art "demonstrates the power of the aesthetic to overrule our normal taste, morality, and intellectual convictions." It was presented as Exhibit A in the decadence of mainstream art criticism.

But whether you are yea or nay on John Currin, the insight Peter was trying to get at in that review is one I agree with. I share the sense that the over-identification of art and politics is bad for both, even if my sense of what exactly is valuable in each is different than Peter's (he let me know this).

If you want to put it "theoretically," I think you must grant "the aesthetic" some kind of limited autonomy. Aesthetics really can draw you in to pay attention to things that you disagree with; good ideas can be lost to an audience via bad presentation. (Peter was clear, in the denouement of that same essay, that something like this was on his mind: "If [Currin's] paintings are to be effectively countered, it must be by other, newer, better paintings.")

In any case, simplistic moralizing was the flip side of the ironic detachment Peter disliked. Both lose the specific quality of the experience of the thing at hand.

When I read a number of Peter Schjeldahl columns back to back, I am struck by how jaundiced his view of artists was. For someone who told me that "romanticism is the default setting of Western cultural minds," he has a very unromantic idea of the artist: as morally fallible, ego-driven, frequently ridiculous, and often just wrong.

Art writing of all kinds defaults to a moral hook because it is easy. Why should a popular audience read about this faded old thing or that strange new thing? Because the person who made it is a hero, a role model, an exemplary human. Everyone can get that.

If you *give up* the moral marketing pitch, you arrive at a livelier appreciation of what is actually going on with the thing in front of you—it's just a harder sell, demanding an appreciation of a kind of experience that is not currently natural (if it ever was), quickening senses dulled by too much media intake. But it's a much more honest take on what the category of experiences that we call "art" does best, and so, in its own

way, more purposive and serious about the subject than the purportedly more purposive and serious domain of “political aesthetics.”

The critic Jarrett Earnest, who edited Schjeldahl’s last book of columns, *Hot, Cold, Heavy, Light*, has written that his reviews were “detective stories about feelings.” It’s a wonderful phrase. But they are detective stories that are never finally solved.

That’s the other thing I notice reading a lot of Schjeldahl—for all his authority, he is often reconsidering, circling back, comparing present experience with past. *I thought this once, now it seems different to me*. Every piece is a record of how thought and perception met on some occasion, and what new things they had to say to each other. I think that sense of constant, uneasy, honest aliveness is what he thought art writing could offer.

There won’t be another one like him.

I don’t just mean that as a generic tribute. When I read his biographical reflections in “The Art of Dying,” there’s so much in it that I can identify with: the fun of learning art history on assignment, the difficulty of artist-critic friendships, the loneliness of writing.

What I don’t identify with is the world that made him. When Peter describes the wondrously haughty New York art and poetry scenes that forged his outlook, I know nothing similar. When he describes the formative experience of learning writing from hard-bitten editors, relentlessly chopping up his writing, sending it back, demanding he do it again—well, very few emerging writers have that experience anymore.

Forms of writing, like forms of art, are shaped by the institutions that materially nurture them. In Schjeldahl’s case that was the world of New York print alt-weeklies and then the *New Yorker*. What these afforded him was something extraordinary: a dedicated space, with a popular audience, to explore art. Not the art world, though the scene flickers in and out—but art, his own experience of it.

He brought a great sense of mission to the beat, making it feel bigger than consumer affairs reporting of the “what to see this week” variety. But that sense of mission is also a *product* of the beat, of a critical mass of institutions that sustain regular, independent thinking about culture. Ultimately, the belief in the public importance of a critic’s intimate experience of art is probably a product of publications that cover art independent of any news hook.

Few art writers raised in the internet era of culture will have the combination of experiences that made Peter’s writing so remarkable: the connection to art as a subculture with its own rhythms and rituals; the training in language; the access to a

stable platform aimed at a non-specialist audience. The floodwaters of the internet are rising even for the *New Yorker*.

And people go on making art. They will make meaningful things in meaningfully new ways. Maybe someone like Schjeldahl, from his perch, wasn't the best person to chronicle these new ways. The disintegrating quality of life and the inflationary quality of culture—it takes more and more of it to generate the same quantity of attention—are contemporary facts, maybe best addressed by writers whose tastes are existentially formed by them. It's possible. I don't know. I still feel like what Peter brought was indispensable, maybe even because of the critical distance he had on the present.

I have the sense with his death that a kind of thinking has passed. It hurts me to think about it.

What larger lesson should we read in the trail of sparkling, provisional thoughts that he leaves behind? You might repurpose what he said about his favorite painter: "We can use Velázquez for remembering how to love life: directly, with an attentiveness and a responsiveness that drive thoughts of 'love' and 'life' out of our heads and consume us like a clear flame."

As an actual presence, he is gone. But mostly we knew him from his writing, where he was expert at the magic trick of feeling powerfully present even as he gave all his thought and attention to something else. That sense of aliveness outlives him.