

REVIEW OF BOOKS

AMERICAN CRITICISM AND HOW IT GOT THAT WAY

Brushes with History: Writing on Art from *The Nation*, 1865-2001, edited by Peter G. Meyer, New York, Thunder's Mouth Press/Nation Books, 2001; 531 pages, \$19.95.

Challenging Art: *Artforum* 1962-1974, by Amy Newman, New York, Soho Press, 2000; 559 pages, \$42.

M/E/A/N/I/N/G: An Anthology of Artists' Writings, Theory, and Criticism, edited by Susan Bee and Mira Schor, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2001; 467 pages, \$69.95 cloth, \$22.95 paper.

BY RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN

The first entry in *Brushes with History*, a hefty anthology of art-related articles from the *Nation*, isn't a piece of art criticism but a fulminating editorial from 1865 against P.T. Barnum's museum in New York, then recently destroyed by fire. Barnum's sins, according to the author (anonymous, like many of the *Nation*'s early contributors), included attracting such a "disreputable crowd" with "vulgar sensation dramas" and "fat women, giants, dwarfs, glass-blowers, mermaids, learned seals and dog shows," that serious amateurs wishing to view the museum's natural history collections could only dare visit early in the morning, before the barbarian hordes arrived. The anthology also includes a reply from Barnum in which he defends the propriety of his establishment: "I permitted no intoxicating liquors in the Museum. I would not even allow my visitors to 'go out to drink' and return again without paying the second time, and this reconciled them to the 'ice-water' which was always profuse and free on each floor of the Museum." The impresario also denies ever presenting such a thing as a sensation drama: "Even in Shakespeare's plays, I unflinchingly and invariably cut out vulgarity and profanity."

These gems of Victorian moral grandstanding are not merely amusing relics but also historically important documents. After denouncing the vulgarities of Barnum's American Museum, the editorial presciently calls for "a real museum" to be built in New York along the lines of London's British Museum, suggesting Central Park as a suitable location. The Metropolitan Museum of Art was founded five years later and, in 1880, moved to a permanent location in Central Park.

Although far better known for its political commentary than its critical coverage, the *Nation* has had a few moments of glory in the latter category: the Barnum editorial being one of them, Clement Greenberg's contributions in the 1940s being another. While Greenberg's essays—there are about a dozen of them reprinted in *Brushes with History*—chart the exciting emergence of Abstract Expressionism, the chief interest of this anthology is in the attention it pays to less familiar chapters of American art history.

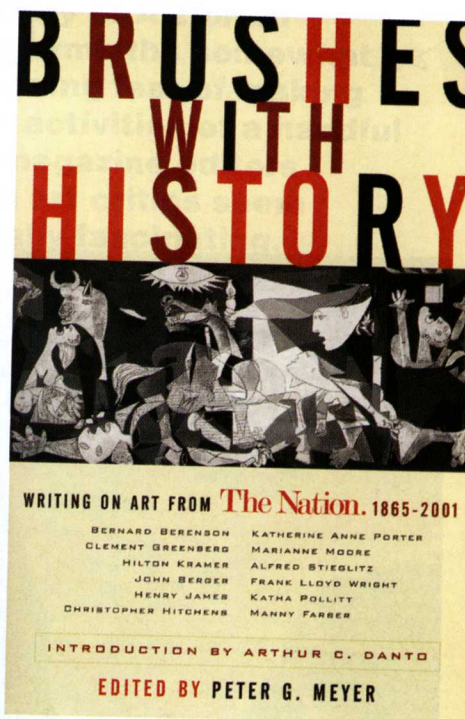
Given America's sense of cultural inferiority at the time, it's no surprise that much of the *Nation*'s late-

19th-century art criticism was penned by Americans in London and Paris. Reviewing two Gustave Moreau paintings shown in Paris in 1876, Henry James committed one of the worst mistakes an art critic can make by confessing that the canvases are "extremely difficult to describe." More sure of herself was Elizabeth Robins Pennell, whom this anthology says may have been "the first regularly published female art critic in American letters" (not that the *Nation*'s readers would have known this: Pennell, who was married to a noted printmaker named Joseph Pennell, signed her contributions "N.N.") The London-based Pennell was a perceptive critic of the Pre-Raphaelites, observing of a Burne-Jones painting: "To the initiated there is scarcely a brushmark but has its hidden or literary meaning; the lover of good painting, however, would prefer less literature and more art." She acquits herself less well in a brief 1898 account of Rodin's *Balzac*, unable to accept it as a "finished statue" even though she admits that it fascinates her. This volume also includes Pennell's final piece for the *Nation*, a 1918 essay puzzling over the absence of women from art history. The subject is ahead of its time, but Pennell's point of view isn't: she suggests that, more than any social barrier, it is "our true limitations as women" which explain the lack of great women artists. Because they so effectively measure the gap between past and present, such now-discredited viewpoints are what make old periodical literature so often worth excavating.

Although, by 1906, one finds Kenyon Cox praising Childe Hassam for developing an original brand of Impressionism, the Eurocentric bias was still strong, to judge by Bernard Berenson's reference, in a 1908 defense of Matisse, to the color sensibilities of "we Europeans." Things gain a more American focus with reviews by Frank Jewett Mather, Jr., of the Society of Independent Artists and the Armory Exhibition. Mather, for whom the College Art Association named its prestigious art-criticism prize, wrote about the art of his day in a thoughtful, straightforward manner, despite his esthetic limitations: he found it "absurd to speak of Cézanne as a great artist" and deemed Cubism to be "either a clever hoax or a negligible pedantry." His successor, the xenophobic antimodernist Thomas Craven, was even less sympathetic to the avant-garde. Balancing these reactionary voices are a few contributions by artists, including Marsden Hartley, and some spirited letters to the editor by John Marin and Alfred Stieglitz.

Politics may have been the *Nation*'s main concern, but it wasn't until the 1930s that ideological issues became explicit in the journal's art writing. In 1931, we find Paul Rosenfeld accusing Matisse of "bourgeois complacency," a few years later Anita Brenner and Margaret Marshall chronicled Diego Rivera's doomed Lenin-adorned Rockefeller Center murals, and throughout the period accusations of Trotskyism and fascism were bandied about on the letters pages.

Unfortunately, this volume seems to have been poorly edited. Misspellings and typos are frequent: Marcel Duchamps, Einstein for Eisenstein, Ad Reinhardt, curator, the White-chapel Art Gallery, Joel Schapiro, Robert Mapplethorpe. The explana-



tory notes before each entry are sometimes misleading: Brenner, identified here as a journalist, is best remembered as a historian of the Mexican Revolution and an influential interpreter of Mexico for a U.S. audience. Similarly, "a short-lived group of painters that were nicknamed 'the irascibles'" is a woefully inadequate description of an important moment in American art history. Readers may also find it a bit frustrating when articles are mentioned in correspondence but not reprinted.

The *Nation* finally got a solid art critic when it hired Greenberg in 1942, and its regular critics in subsequent decades have continued to be distinguished: Fairfield Porter, Max Kozloff, Lawrence Alloway and, since 1984, Arthur C. Danto, who introduces this volume and takes credit for conceiving it. Also of interest, but less well known as a critic, is the poet-painter-musician Weldon Kees, who took over briefly from Greenberg in 1949. *Brushes with History* includes only two texts by Kees, one of them an effective, irony-laced attack from 1949 on George A. Dondero, a Michigan congressman who was denouncing modern art as a Communist conspiracy. Greenberg may have been a far better critic than Kees, but it's hard to imagine him publicly challenging a red-baiting Republican.

Indeed, in one of the stranger episodes of the McCarthy period, the *Nation* sued Greenberg for libel in 1951. He had published a letter in another journal, the *New Leader*, accusing the *Nation* and its foreign editor, J. Alvarez Del Vayo, of being pawns of the Soviet Union. The present anthology includes a couple of pieces about the lawsuit, which was dropped in 1955. Also resurrected is another 1950s controversy involving attempts by Richard Nixon and others to destroy some supposedly subversive murals in a San Francisco post office. And for those who

think today's New York art world is cut-throat, a 1956 report by the late Walter Goodman on attempts by a vice president of Wildenstein to tap the phone of an associate of Knoedler Gallery should be an eye-opener.

As the selections come closer to the present, there are fewer surprises and more straightforward exhibition reviews by Kozloff, Alloway and Danto. A discordant note is heard in Margaret Spillane's 1990 article, which attacks Karen Finley for her "superficial depiction of working people" and blames the narcissistic arts community for bringing down on itself the wrath of right-wing politicians. More outreach to minorities and the poor, Spillane insists, would have stymied Jesse Helms.

The last text in *Brushes with History* is a piece by Danto on Damien Hirst's New York exhibition of 2000. The philosopher-critic ends his review thus: "The walls at Gagosian have even been decorated with a tasteful green graph-paper motif, to imply the atmosphere of a natural history museum that Hirst's pieces seem to create. The show really feels, however, like a toyland, a Halloween extravaganza with something for everyone. Take the kids." The success of Hirst's brand of art-as-spectacle makes you wonder if we have really progressed at all from the days of P.T. Barnum's museum. Altogether less optimistic about the state of things than Danto, Carl Andre observes, at the end of a brief 1994 letter to the *Nation's* editor, "People have the arts & government they want & deserve. Just look around you."

At first glance, *Artforum* and the *Nation* seem to have little in common: one is a liberal weekly of political opinion and analysis, with a limited amount of cultural coverage, the other is a glossy art monthly known for championing avant-garde developments. It's all the more surprising, then, to read that *Artforum's* founding editor, Phillip Leider, discovered the model for his magazine in the pages of the *Nation*. It wasn't the *Nation's* art criticism that inspired Leider but its literary coverage, specifically

Kenneth Rexroth's writings about the Beats. What struck Leider was Rexroth's willingness to lavish extravagant praise on the Beats—for instance, saying that Jack Kerouac was as good as Céline. Leider, who considered Kerouac to be "a totally illiterate kid" in comparison to Céline, was no fan of the Beats, but he appreciated the impact of Rexroth's boosterism. "I realized," Leider recalls, early on in Amy Newman's oral history of *Artforum*, "that what he was doing was creating a movement, and so therefore I never hesitated to be hyperbolic."

There's plenty more ammunition in this book for those who believe that contemporary art is riddled with conspiracies and cabals. Leider describes how one day in the early 1960s, he drew up a "battle plan" with Walter Hopps, Irving Blum and John Coplans in order to promote the artists they liked: "Walter was going to be the museum guy and Irving was going to be the dealer. I was going to be the editor, and . . . John was going to be the critic." Although Hopps, Blum and Coplans did indeed become influential figures, what renders this plot more comic than sinister is that the artists they and Leider were scheming to elevate were not, say, Donald Judd or Andy Warhol, but fellow Californians such as Ken Price and Billy Al Bengston. (*Artforum*, which Leider initially wanted to call *Art West*, began in 1962 as a magazine focused on the art scenes of San Francisco and Los Angeles.)

Apart from its considerable value as a chronicle of American art in the '60s and '70s, Newman's book performs the somewhat amazing feat of making the activities of a handful of magazine editors and art critics seem totally fascinating. One secret to the book's readability is the way it draws on a variety of popular narrative genres. The beginning, for instance, evokes the opening sequences of countless Hollywood movies from *The Magnificent Seven* to *Ocean's Eleven*, where the hero gathers his loyal, multitalented band of noble outlaws. Here, Robert Rosenblum and Yvonne Rainer wander into Leider's L.A. office: "I wasn't really sure who either of them were. . . . I had to learn from someone who Bobby Rosenblum was. I think Barbara Rose told me he was a very great academic. I think she said 'He's Mr. Late Eighteenth Century.' That's how it happened." He finds a production designer named Jackie Mulcahy: "She was ravishing. God, was she beautiful. And very sexy. And also she just knew the printing industry inside out. That was how we got her." Another walk-in, Peter Plagens, climbs the stairs to *Artforum's* office and bluntly tells Leider, "I want to review for this magazine." A little later, Barbara Rose introduces Leider to her New York posse: "She brought in Michael Fried. . . . [E]very letter she wrote had ideas. 'Get Annette Michelson. Get Sidney Tillim. Nobody likes him but he's a really good writer.'"

The *Artforum* gang also included artists such as Frank Stella: "I think from the moment I met Frank I knew that this was a guy who would never betray me," Leider tells Newman. Lines like this give the book the flavor of a Mafia memoir, with Clement Greenberg, of course, playing the Godfather. Rose's account of how Fried turned against Stella's work reads like an episode from the life of John Gotti. One evening, Stella and Rose, who were then husband and wife, show disrespect to Greenberg at his home (by standing up for Ad Reinhardt). The don of Central Park West has no choice but to call in Princeton hit man

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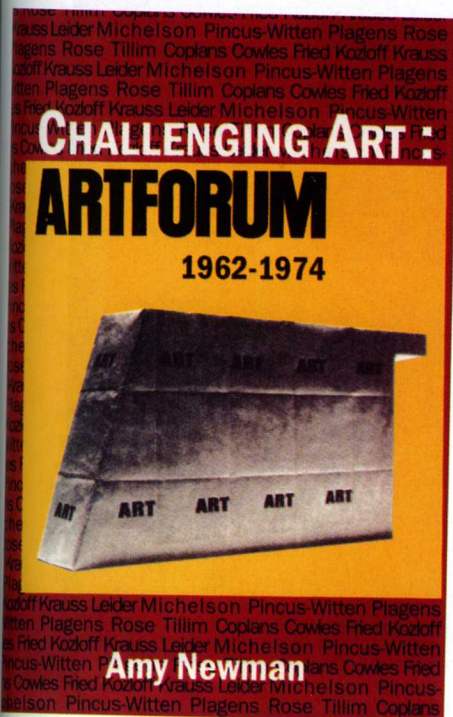
Michael Fried. "Well," recalls Rose, "Michael was Frank's best friend. Our son is named after him. And Clem put the squeeze on Michael. And Michael, I think out of his own personal conviction and out of a terrible moral dilemma involving theatricality, which is spelled out in 'Art and Objecthood,' came to be critical of Frank's paintings."

Challenging Art can also be read as a kind of tell-all bio, trashing art critics instead of celebrities. Leider, whose voice dominates much of the book, complains about nearly every one of his writers: he loses his trust in Plagens, is frightened by Rose, says of Max Kozloff: "I didn't like the way he wrote, I didn't like the way he talked, when I met him I didn't like him personally." Since this is a multi-voiced account, sometimes to a *Rashomon*-like degree, Kozloff comes in for praise from other *Artforum* contributors: "Max writes wonderfully" (Brian O'Doherty/Patrick Ireland); "I admired his writing style" (Rosenblum).

Momentarily recasting the history of *Artforum* as an ethnic saga, Kozloff opines, in a memorable phrase, that since the 1930s, "American art criticism, with few exceptions, had been a small-time Jewish sect." There were some Gentiles at the magazine, he admits, but "all the others were by and large Jewish, the editors and most of the writers." Seventy pages later, Tillim echoes this when he describes how he and Leider "incorporated our Yiddishness into our modern persona." For Rose, it's important to understand that she and her colleagues, many of them children of immigrants, "are the first self-consciously American Americans, and we want to understand our culture and contribute to it."

Another subplot is the naive, idealistic country boy coming to the corrupt big city, a sort of *Mr. Leider Goes to Gotham*. Even though Leider grew up in New York, his decision in 1967 to move *Artforum's* offices there from California, where he'd been living since the late '50s, put him in much closer contact with the competitive gallery scene. By his own admission, Leider was ill suited to the public demands of his job: "[I] prefer correspondence to other forms of communication, hate using the telephone, am terrified of meeting people, can't stand artists . . . get physically sick at all social functions, especially art world parties and openings," he confessed in a 1966 letter to Fried. Leider lasted only three years in New York, resigning the editorship in 1970 to return to the West Coast.

Newman also offers something for the business-minded reader. When John Coplans takes over as editor, we are treated to an account of the cost-cutting measures he imposed, complete with minutiae about leasing office equipment and the economics of



M/E/A/N/I/N/G

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SUSAN BEE AND MIRA SCHOR, EDITORS with a foreword by Johanna Drucker

binding staples. In what seems a strikingly malevolent move, Leider claims to have recommended Coplans as editor specifically because he believed him to be unqualified for the job. Coplans returned the favor by making Leider the dedicatee of the 10th anniversary issue: it was full of articles intellectually offensive to the former editor, who wrote back that Coplans's tribute was "like dedicating the Aswan Dam to Golda Meir."

Amid all the psychodrama, *Challenging Art* provides an incredible amount of information about the evolution of American art, perhaps even more than can be found in the pages of *Artforum* itself. After a quarter of a century or more, the protagonists have gained in objectivity and are able to acknowledge things that they couldn't say publicly at the time. Wisely, Newman also calls on articulate observers from outside the *Artforum* inner circle (I'm thinking of Mel Bochner and Carter Ratcliff, in particular). Through their testimony, one gets a clearer sense of the eclipse of formalism and the professionalization of art institutions—in other words, how the art world of today came into being. Given the strong personalities and ancient feuds involved, this can't have been an easy project to realize. Newman has done a great job in getting candid responses and weaving them into a cohesive narrative.

Although *Artforum* is still going strong, albeit in very different form, Newman ends her chronicle in 1974. According to Rose, two events of that year signaled the end of an era: the infamous ad showing a nude dildo-wielding Lynda Benglis that occasioned an editorial schism at the magazine, and the decision by Rosalind Krauss, one of the signatories of a letter protesting Benglis's ad, to publicly attack Greenberg's alteration of David Smith's sculptures [see *A.i.a.*, May '74]. As the deeply disillusioned Rose puts it, "the thing that broke up *Artforum* 'part one' became the agenda of 'part two': attacking Greenberg, *épater le bourgeois* art, superficial but opaque writing, trendiness."

Twelve years after the Benglis scandal, the inaugural issue of *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*, a journal that appeared from 1986 to 1996 and was largely written by artists, carried an essay by one of its editors, Mira Schor, denouncing the misogyny she found in the paintings of David Salle and the complicity of the critics who had written about his work. Salle's "abuse of the female nude is a political strategy that feeds on the backlash against feminism," Schor asserted, taking a position not so far from that of Krauss and company, who found Benglis's ad to be "a gesture that reads as a shabby mockery of the aims" of the women's liberation movement. Schor's "Appropriated Sexuality" is a bracing piece, and although the journal it appeared in had small circulation, the article was a sharp nail in the coffin of the Neo-Expressionist movement with which Salle was then identified. Schor used humor as well as analysis to make her point, suggesting that Salle's well-known painting *What Is the Reason for Your Visit to Germany?* (1984) might be more accurately titled *Bend Over Baby, While I Quote Jasper Johns*. (I, for one, will never be able to look at the painting in question without thinking of Schor's alternative.)

If Schor took Salle's compliant critics to task, another essay in the same issue, by poet Charles Bernstein, took aim at the big art magazines (*Artforum*, *Art News* and *Art in America*). He accused them of being "almost wholly absorbed in the process of promotion" and suggested that "inflation of the art market informs every aspect of their editorial content." Although such magazines may sometimes publish "worthwhile" articles and even, on occasion, "neo-Marxist" appreciations of postmodern art, they are, Bernstein argued, hamstrung by "editorial policies that institutionalize interpretative practices." *Art in America*, in particular, roused his ire: for publishing a "grotesque forum on museum 'blockbusters,'" for its "aggressively 'normalizing' copyediting," and for the very layouts of its articles, which create "a visual continuum with the gallery ads." Even when an author (Bernstein cites Hal Foster for his article on Neo-Geo) sets out to "expose the complicity of artworks in the capitalist system," such efforts are undercut by the writer's "institutional affiliation and choice of discursive style."

While it seems rather naive of Bernstein, who is a leading exponent of Language poetry (a discourse-mixing, deconstructive mode of writing), to expect a wide-circulation commercial magazine to behave like a little underground journal, his comments are a welcome reminder that art writing can arouse a passionate response, or at least could do so 16 years ago. In Duke University's anthology of writings from *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*, passionate responses, along with ideological arguments, are in plentiful supply. Perhaps the journal's most important contribution to art discourse was its "forums," in which numerous artists and writers were invited to comment on a given topic. (In my precapitalist-lackey days, I contributed a brief statement, not reprinted here, to one *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* forum.) The critical essays in the anthology, apart from Schor's and Bernstein's opening salvos, are less engaging—they might have benefited from, dare I say it, a little "normalizing copyediting."

The anthology includes generous selections from

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forums on such topics as "Authenticity and Meaning," "Racism in the Arts" and "Motherhood, Art, and Apple Pie." Their keynote is candor: Daryl Chin describes how art-world racism prompted him to shift from art-making to art activism, Nancy Fried notes the impact her two bouts with breast cancer had on her sculpture, Amy Sillman recounts a nightmare about being raped by a Basque terrorist and how the episode made its way into one of her paintings, Jane Dickson sketches the challenges of pursuing an art career as a mother of two. The "Motherhood" forum is full of revealing accounts by such artists as Yvonne Jacquette, Miriam Schapiro, Joan Snyder, Nancy Spero and others.

Born at the height of the 1980s art market as a venue for points of view that weren't being heard elsewhere, *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* really came into its own during the economic downturn of the early '90s. A recurring theme in the forums is the sheer difficulty of being an artist. William Pope.L: "Few artists make their living selling art. Most lose money making art. Most are in the red. Most are angry, frustrated from living in the red." Melissa Meyer: "For an artist, just surviving is a form of success." Barbara Pollack: "To me, every artist managing to live and work in New York City right now is a genius. I am surrounded by artists who are out of work or hold two jobs, are facing AIDS and cancer, must support families or struggle alone. Yet they continue to make art." One of the best pieces in the book is "Running on Empty: An Artist's Life in New York," a litany of clichéd advice and insensitive comments that *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*'s other editor, Susan Bee, has been subjected to during her painting career. These range from typical dealer brush-offs ("Come back in six months," "Your slides are lost") to practical advice from artist friends ("Rent a basement space," "Don't believe what dealers tell you," "Put \$50 more paint on the canvas") to psychological analysis ("You're not ambitious enough"), empty compliments ("This painting is clearly the culmination of your work"), outright put-downs ("I like your old work better") and contradictory recipes for success ("Just ignore the outside world," "Go to more openings"). Anyone who has spent time in the art world has heard countless platitudes like these, and probably uttered a few.

Unlike many preceding artist-run magazines, from *It Is* to *The Fox*, *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* didn't identify itself with any particular movement or style. This may make it less appealing to conventional art historians, but for readers who are curious about what it actually felt like to be a struggling American artist circa 1990, *M/E/A/N/I/N/G* is an invaluable resource. □