

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.

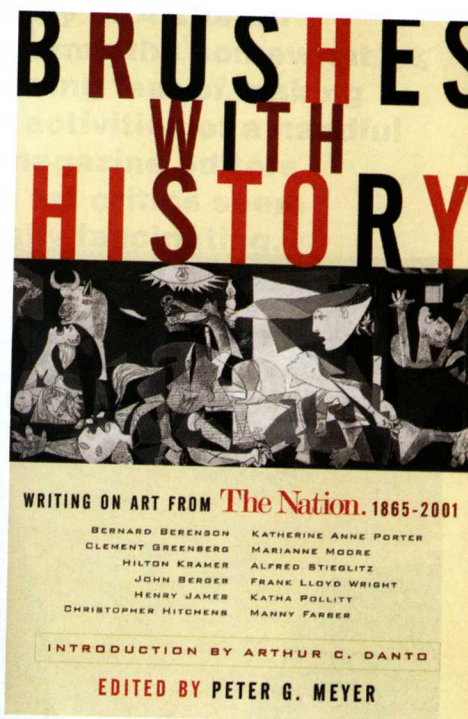
Given America's sense of cultural inferiority at the time, it's no surprise that much of the *Nation's* late-

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 Rheinhardt, 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

