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Pantheon of the Anteater

by P.C. Smith

David Salle: *Big Letter Rack*, 1993,
oil and acrylic on canvas, 84 by 114
inches. © VAGA, New York.



In the first installment of a two-part article, the author recounts his experience taking a free art criticism course taught by David Salle at Bruce High Quality Foundation University, New York.

Aren't famous artists supposed to utter only Delphic-Warholian oracles, self-protecting riddles for critics to interpret, curt statements like "What you see is what you see"? When I was a young artist trying to develop a work habit, but avoiding work by reading, I stumbled across a memoir by Henry Moore. The sculptor was in the English countryside, carving all day and then showering with a bucket of water before dinner. In the evening, fireside, he wrote letters. But Moore insisted that he never wrote about his aesthetic ideas or what he was trying to accomplish. If one wrote about an idea, he felt, its seed might be released prematurely and not be forced to emerge as sculpture.

So why did David Salle volunteer to teach a course, called "Leave the Theory at Home—Writing About Art," last fall at the artist-collective Bruce High Quality Foundation's free school, started in 2009, in New York City? (I have been on the e-mail list for Bruce High Quality Foundation [BHQF] since participating in several of their Brucennials, huge word-of-mouth unjuried alternatives to the Whitney Biennial.) Salle was not only teaching writing but

turning out a monthly column on art for the off-my-radar magazine *Town & Country*. I did associate Salle with criticality. I'd read an interview in the 1980s in which he challenged the validity of every question the interviewer posed.¹ I decided to enroll.

Salle's decision to write has a well-known backstory. In the early 1990s, he cultivated the writer Janet Malcolm, because he liked the character of her writing. More than a year of studio visits culminated not in the Gagosian Gallery exhibition catalogue that Salle had proposed but in Malcolm's "Forty-One False Starts," published in the *New Yorker* in 1994. Today her article is still considered an exemplary work from what writer Gideon Lewis-Kraus has called "the generation of great *New Yorker* writers who came of age around the time the legacy of the New Journalism was petering out."² Malcolm noted Salle's role in the process:

For Salle (who has experimented with sculpture, video, and film) the interview is another medium in which to (playfully) work. It has its careerist dimension, but he also does it for the sport. . . . Sometimes it almost seems as if he were provoking the interviewer to put him on the spot, so that he can display his ingenuity in getting off it.

When Salle alluded to critical opposition to his work, saying, "I'm resigned to being misinterpreted," Malcolm asked, "Then why do you give all these interviews?" She notes: "Salle thought for a moment and replied, 'It's a lazy person's form of writing.'"³

An artist might avoid writing not out of laziness but because it is another all-consuming medium. I'd contributed reviews to the back of art magazines for years but tired of it. After one described the work and the artist's career, maybe two sentences would be left to express the still-vague ruminations the work provoked—and that would usually get edited. I liked writing's discipline for thinking about art. I was sick of reviews, though, and wanted to try some other form. Salle's class turned out to be exactly the inspiration I needed, largely because of the unusual readings.

Salle went out of his way to avoid assigning well-known art critics. Journalist A.J. Liebling's "Debut of a Seasoned Artist," published in the *New Yorker* in 1954, was about a boxer at training camp. We read fiction (Renata Adler's *Pitch Dark*, 1983) and memoirs (James Salter's *Burning the Days: Recollections*, 1997, and Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans: Being a History of a Family's Progress*, 1925) for their unique styles. Their beautiful prose seemed distant from my experience writing reviews.

Salle's course description stated that "this class will use the idea of 'personality' as a lens through which to approach recent art." A lot of people

signed up for the course, attracted by Salle's personality, and, for the first time, a BHFU class was oversubscribed. The collective considered moving it from their East Village walk-up to an auditorium, but Salle decided to select a smaller group with a questionnaire. It ranged from: "1. Define the difference between satire and sarcasm" to "9. If you happened to see the Jeff Koons show at David Zwirner last May, describe in two sentences what the work was about. If you did not see it, make something up." The class was split between artists and writers. At the first class meeting, I found myself perched awkwardly on a sculptor's idea of a chair next to Jeffrey Deitch, just returned to New York City from his stint as director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles. (Apparently he was a guest, since he didn't return.)

During the initial class, Salle suggested we pay attention to our first impressions of artworks, in the same way we form first impressions of people when meeting them. His assistant for the class e-mailed us a link to Frank O'Hara's 1959 essay "Personism: A Manifesto," which at first impressed me as a parody of manifestos. O'Hara explains:

[Personism] was founded by me after lunch with LeRoi Jones on August 27, 1959, a day in which I was in love with someone (not Roi, by the way, a blond). I went back to work and wrote a poem for this person. While I was writing it, I was realizing that if I wanted to, I could use the telephone instead of writing the poem, and so Personism was born.⁴

O'Hara's chattiness camouflages or, rather, memorably *personifies*, a real poetic manifesto. Instead of abstract ideas, O'Hara's manifesto uses specific characters. As "Personism" suggests that poems be imagined as phoned rather than written, Salle advised us to talk about art in earthy language, to unlearn academic habits and to develop our wit. He proposed we forge a distinct literary style, with imaginative leaps. O'Hara seemed to think one should just go on instinct: "As for measure and other technical apparatus, that's just common sense: if you're going to buy a pair of pants you want them to be tight enough so everyone will want to go to bed with you."⁵

Salle was willing to try exercises to begin with. He asked us to select any 10 artworks and write something about each that would "explode its context," flipping the usual expectations. He noted Alex Katz's habit of assigning locations to artworks: "That's a painting that belongs in a pizza parlor." The assignment was unexpectedly difficult, even though one could make any association, whether completely absurd or suggestively surreal. One student, a young Brooklyn curator, offered: "Morandi's work says I only drink water, no ice. . . . Claes Oldenburg's sculptures say look in between your couch cushions."

For examples of flipped expectations, we read parodies. Ian Frazier's "Thanks for the Memory" was a 1989 *New Yorker* lampoon of Bob Hope's golfing memoir, as studded with archaic name-drops and improbable boasts as an art magazine social column. Veronica Geng's *Partners*, a parody of *New York Times* marriage announcements, also recast signs of status:

The bride, an alumna of the Royal Doulton School and Looe University, is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Cyrus Harvester Lauderdale. Her father is retired from the family consortium. She is also a descendant of Bergdorf Goodman of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Her previous marriage ended in pharmaceuticals.⁶

It dawned on me that Salle actually preferred the heightened distortions of parody. Parody is also the core strategy of the Bruce High Quality Foundation artists. Most of us, ambitious, well-educated artists and writers, weren't ready, perhaps, to take humor so seriously. But Salle denigrated the seriousness of art writing in magazines, newspapers and especially gallery press releases, saying, "Intentionality doesn't matter. Meaning is usually the intention behind *the intention*." According to Salle, when he read Malcolm's comment "I have never found anything any artist has said about his work interesting" (in "Forty-One False Starts"), he'd thought, "really strong!" followed by "surely not me!" But he said that he'd come to believe it was true.

Instead of general intentions, Salle wanted particular characters, and for that he chose two essays from Manny Farber's 1998 book of film criticism, *Negative Space*. His essay "The Decline of the Actor" (1966) describes how creative, idiosyncratic character-acting, the memorable gist of classic B-movies, was being pushed aside by an over-determinist Hollywood movie machine. Reacting to David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia*, he writes, "While the other technicians are walloping away, the actors, stuck like thumbtacks into a maplike event, are allowed—and then only for a fraction of the time—to contribute a declamatory, school-pageant bit of acting."⁷ The other Farber essay, "Jean-Luc Godard" (1968), discusses how Godard makes actors into "wind-up dolls," creating a distancing effect that the director harnessed in varied ways to develop the different movies' individual qualities or, as Farber memorably put it, Godard's "truculently formulated beasts."⁸ In fact, Farber opens the essay with a bestiary drawn from Godard films: "a zoo that includes a pink parakeet (*A Woman Is a Woman*), a diamond-black snake (*Contempt*), a whooping crane (*Band of Outsiders*)." The passage could have been Farber's response to Salle's context-exploding assignment. Also Farber did not use my normalized phrase "distancing effect." What Farber said was, "No filmmaker has so consistently made me feel like a stupid ass."

Salle contrasted Farber's tone with the way art criticism today so often "spreads this blanket of cheery gooey approbation over everything," an approach which Salle considered "an enormous burden on the artist." Salle effused over Farber's descriptions. For instance, Farber portrays actor Eddie Constantine as "a bullfrog whose face has been corrugated by a defective waffle iron." Salle said that reading Farber in *Artforum* as a teenager "felt like the top of my head was coming off! I didn't know you could talk like that."

For Salle, Farber exemplified how great criticism came out of strong character: "Manny Farber had a whole different view of what is important. To many people he seemed a crackpot. On accepting a [film festival] award for lifetime

achievement, he started out, 'My team lost.'" I later decided Farber's "team" might be the termite practitioners from his 1962 essay "White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art." He contrasts the latter with the "serious" themes and grandiose ambition of the former. Farber writes: "Good work usually arises where the creators . . . have no ambitions towards 'gilt' culture, but are involved in a kind of squandering-beaverish endeavor that isn't anywhere or for anything." And "Termite-like, [good art] feels its way through walls of particularization, with no sign that the artist has any object in mind other than eating away the immediate boundaries of his art, and turning these boundaries into conditions of the next achievement."⁹

David Salle (seated) with his class at Bruce High Quality Foundation University, 2013. Courtesy BHQF, New York



Reading Farber on Godard, I was also struck by how apt that essay was for Salle's art. Didn't Salle make one feel donkeylike with suggestive but inconclusive juxtapositions? Who else but a termite would produce the obsessive iterations of coiffures and starbursts in his midcareer paintings? I thought of the highly successful Salle, though, as more anteatier than termite on the food-for-thought chain. The sardonic details that Farber describes in Godard seemed to cue Salle's affectless tableaux: "Looking blankly across the table, she says 'et cetera' and Guillaume repeats the word with the same deadpan inflection, so that each syllable carries a little, sticky, Elmer's glue sound."¹⁰

As it turned out, someone had connected Salle and Godard before. In 1986, art critic Sanford Schwartz, in "Polke's Dots, Or, A Generation Comes into Focus," surveyed the Neo-Expressionists, including Salle:

Popular culture used to be something an artist brought into his work in order to give it a jolt of real life; the point was to bring art down to earth. Popular culture is more ingrained now. . . . Didn't Jean-Luc Godard, in his movies of the sixties, create such a world, where people were walking and talking cartoon characters? Godard was a forerunner, but . . . his tone is witty,

analytic, self-conscious. Every kiss and every murder is in italics. That self-consciousness is gone. Many artists now seem to feel that they can be most serious—that they can be most themselves—when they put their feelings in the mouths of puppets.¹¹

Schwartz, who often writes for the *New York Review of Books*, was one of the only contemporary art critics that Salle assigned, leaving the usual suspects bracketed, at home. In "Polke's Dots," Schwartz contrasts the new expressionist group with 1960s artists:

Many artists now draw, with paint, on patterned fabrics, or on photographs, and when oil is drawn over, say, a decorative fabric, a layer-upon-layer effect is produced—a 3-D sense of things going back into space.

After looking at these pictures you may see earlier artists, even Old Masters, differently. You may find yourself "bringing forward" the backgrounds of paintings, and reading backgrounds and foregrounds as a sort of blinking throbbing surface. The effect, or point, isn't only optical or formal. It's emotional too. . . . It is as if this were a period that wants to reintroduce heroes in paintings—wants to bring back the figure—and yet wants to show the not always substantial thoughts of these heroes. . . . Not only is the sense of space in the work of Judd, Katz, Johns, Frankenthaler, Twombly and the rest extremely shallow, but the works themselves push out against a viewer like so many shields. . . . "No, don't come any further." . . . The new painting in its surfaces and sense of space, says, "Enter."¹²

The essay in full creates a breathtaking perspective, as Schwartz pulls back from specific stylistic choices to reveal a vast shift in sensibility.

Fifteen years later, writing about the Cindy Sherman retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Schwartz recalls the way female Pictures Generation artists, including Sherman, Barbara Kruger and Sherrie Levine, were set in opposition to male expressionist painters like Salle in the '80s.

He describes how Sherman's work evolved, seemingly without plan, into "a roller coaster of discontent, at times recalling Otto Dix, at other times Carol Burnett."

At Sherman's retrospective, though, one wonders if any of the so-called Neo-Expressionists . . . have been as consistently expressionistic in the new work as she has. . . . Coming from artists who grew up in the late 1950s and 1960s, in a time of great national wealth and self-assurance, [Expressionism] can present contemporary life as, rather, overbearing, even frightening, yet in down-to-earth, and occasionally funny ways. . . . Sherman does full justice to this complex note.¹³

SALLE CONSIDERS AMERICA'S greatest critic to be Edmund Wilson (1895-1972). Besides "staggering erudition and empathy," a key to Wilson's greatness was his ability to engage emotionally with his subject. As Salle said, "If you're not able to describe the emotional landscape of the character, you're missing something." While urging us to read *Axel's Castle* (1931) and other books in full, Salle assigned Wilson's essay "Hemingway: Gauge of Morale." Salle noted that Wilson prophetically "deplored the way Hemingway became a brand":

He passes into a phase where he is occupied with building up his public personality. He has already now become a legend . . . and unluckily—but for an American inevitably—the opportunity soon presents itself to exploit this personality for profit: he turns up delivering Hemingway monologues in well-paying and trashy magazines.¹⁴

Wilson sees Hemingway's *Green Hills of Africa* (1935) continuing the downhill slide: "Almost the only thing we learn about the animals is that Hemingway wants to kill them. And as for the natives, though there is a fine description of a tribe of marvelous trained runners, the principal impression we get of them is that they were a simple and inferior people who enormously admired Hemingway."¹⁵ Wilson is most sarcastic about *To Have and Have Not* (1937): "The only way in which Hemingway's outlaw suffers by comparison with Popeye is that his creator has not tried to make him plausible by explaining that he does it all on spinach."¹⁶ In the essay, Wilson had started sympathetically with Hemingway's early stories: "Even fishing in *Big Two-Hearted River*—away and free in the woods—he had been conscious in a curious way of the cruelty inflicted on the fish, even of the silent agonies endured by the live bait, the grasshoppers kicking on the hook. . . . The brutality of life is always there, and it is somehow bound up with the enjoyment. . . . The resolution of this dissonance in art made the beauty of Hemingway's stories."¹⁷ Wilson describes Hemingway's early "uneasiness" that is "undruggable," giving way later to "the drugging process" as Hemingway indulges alcohol. Salle also had us read "The Return of Ernest Hemingway," in which Hemingway is redeemed in Wilson's estimate upon the publication of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.¹⁸

It was easy to see why Salle assigned Wilson's essay. Wilson's charting of an emotional decline across the wars and continents of Hemingway's numerous books juggles enormous scope, yet hands us simple, amusing images. Wilson also impresses with his early, intuitive, emotional sensitivity to feminist concerns, seeing Hemingway's antagonistic fear of women and his quasi-hysteria in describing homosexuals. Wilson pinpoints both Hemingway's greatness and failings without seeming at all half-hearted.

Fairfield Porter, the only art critic that Salle assigned apart from Schwartz, functioned as Salle's artist-who-writes model. We read the painter Rackstraw Downes's detailed introduction to Porter's *Art in Its Own Terms: Selected Criticism 1935-1975*. From the beginning Porter's criticism was adamantly independent. Downes notes that Porter's writing developed along with his

friendship with Clement Greenberg, whom he met in 1938: "We always argued. We always disagreed." When Greenberg told him, "You can't paint figuratively today," Porter remembered, "I might have become an abstract painter except for that."¹⁹ When Greenberg published his most sweeping overviews—"Towards a Newer Laocoön" (1940) and "American-Type Painting" (1955)—in *Partisan Review*, Porter immediately responded with letters to the editor, arguing against Greenberg's proscriptive criticism, which claimed to ground itself in Hegelian dialectic: "He seems to say in 'Towards a Newer Laocoön' that History justifies the latest fashion."⁵ Salle commended Porter's "taking on the Marxist theorists," urging us not to be "cowed by those things—they'll be replaced by other ideas." (This wasn't a right-left debate; Porter was himself a socialist.)

Porter was known for his short reviews. In 1951 he began writing freighted paragraphs, often a dozen per issue, for *Art News*, which in those days tried to review every show of any substance in New York. He later wrote about art writing in his essay "The Short Review" for the magazine *It is.*, which Downes describes as "the house organ" of the Eighth Street Club. Porter suggests sensibly that an estimation of a work's importance should be implied only in the description of the work. (At the outset of the course, Salle likewise expounded on writers' decrees of importance: "Who the fuck cares?!") Porter went on to say:

Realist painting, which has an obvious subject matter, can be most valuably discussed in terms of its form—how and how well is its reality presented? Abstract painting in which the sensuous elements are undisguised and obvious can perhaps best be written about in terms of its subject matter, which is largely the artist himself, that is, his character.²¹

Also from *It is.*, we read "Five Participants in a Hearsay Panel," a satirical discussion between Ab-Ex painters Joan Mitchell, Norman Bluhm, Michael Goldberg and Elaine de Kooning, recorded by Elaine de Kooning and "tampered with" by Frank O'Hara. Willem de Kooning once declared "content is a glimpse," and similarly the content of this conversation constantly shifts. Using bad puns or worse koans, the artists also parody the practice of attributing aphorisms to influential names (as I just did with de Kooning).

"Norman: Frank says: 'Style at its lowest ebb is method. Style at its highest ebb is personality.' . . .

Elaine: Peter [Stander] also said: 'Tradition holds your pants up and the Academy is what you put in your pocket.' . . .

Mike: Right now, I notice, there is a worship of the New.

Norman: Well, naturally. There's only one thing new to anyone. That's himself. That's why we paint in the first person singular.

Mike: It doesn't look so singular to me. Why is it that hot-off-the-griddle

art is usually hot off somebody else's griddle?

Frank: Bob says we're a generation of swipers.

Elaine: Joan says Norman said: It's third person art parading as first person art.

Frank: George says Mayakovsky says Third person art involves craftsmanship.

Mike: All art involves craftsmanship.

Elaine: Dada didn't.

Mike: Yes, but Neo-Dada does. As soon as any gesture is repeated, craft is involved.

Joan: Neo-Dada has become Neo-Mama.

Norman: Neo-Mau Mau, you mean."²²

And so on. Salle saw an echo of the panel's associations in Bob Dylan's "Positively 4th Street" period lyrics. He asked us to guess at possible meanings of the painters' aphorisms. Not as a pedagogic preamble; he never brought us around to some point we should have seen. He seemed to want us to look for meanings for the fun of it, to put in our pockets.

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1. "David Salle—An Art & Design Interview," *New Art: An International Survey*, ed. Andreas Papadakis et al., London, Academy Editions and New York, Rizzoli International USA, 1991, pp. 134-37.
2. Gideon Lewis-Kraus, "Janet Malcolm's stories," *Times Literary Supplement*, Aug. 14, 2013, pp. 7-8.
3. Janet Malcolm, "Forty-One False Starts," *New Yorker*, July 11, 1994, p. 68.
4. Frank O'Hara, "Personism: A Manifesto," *Yugen*, no. 7, 1961, pp. 28-29.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
6. Veronica Geng, *Partners*, New York, HarperCollins, 1984, p. 41.
7. Manny Farber, "The Decline of the Actor," *Negative Space: Manny Farber on the Movies*, Cambridge, Mass., Da Capo Press, 1998, p. 146.
8. Manny Farber, "Jean-Luc Godard," *Ibid.*, pp. 259-68.
9. Manny Farber, "White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art," *Film Culture*, Winter 1962, p. 9.
10. Farber, "Jean-Luc Godard," p. 264.
11. Farber, "Jean-Luc Godard," p. 264.[fn]Sanford Schwartz, "Polke's Dots, Or, A Generation Comes into Focus," *Artists and Writers*, New York, Yarrow Press, 1990, p. 199.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 196-200.
13. Sanford Schwartz, "The Art of the Impersonator," *New York Review of Books*, June 7, 2012, pp. 30-31.

14. Edmund Wilson, "Hemingway: Gauge of Morale," *Literary Essays and Reviews of the 1930s & 40s*, New York, Library of America, 2007, pp. 425-26.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 427.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 428.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 418-19.
18. Edmund Wilson, "Return of Ernest Hemingway," *Literary Essays and Reviews of the 1930s & 40s*, New York, Library of America, 2007, pp. 885-89.
19. Fairfield Porter, *Art in Its Own Terms: Selected Criticism 1935-1975*, ed. Rackstraw Downes, Boston, MFA Publications/artWorks, 2008, p. 28.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 169.
22. Elaine de Kooning, Frank O'Hara, Joan Mitchell, Michael Goldberg and Norman Bluhm, "5 Participants in a Hearsay Panel," *It is.*, Spring 1960, pp. 59-62.

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