

*“Made in England”: art history, criticism and curating
through the writings of Lawrence Alloway, Dawn Ades
and Lawrence Gowing*

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"Made in England": art history, criticism and curating through the writings of Lawrence Alloway, Dawn Ades and Lawrence Gowing

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REFERENCES

Dawn Ades, *Writings on Art and Anti-Art*, Londres: Ridinghouse, 2015

Lawrence Gowing, *Selected Writings on Art*, Londres: Ridinghouse, 2015

Lawrence Alloway: Critic and Curator, Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2015, (Issues & Debates)

- 1 Lawrence Gowing, Lawrence Alloway and Dawn Ades make for perhaps a rather unlikely triumvirate. Yet the recent publication by Ridinghouse of volumes collating Gowing and Ades's extensive critical output, together with Lucy Bradnock, Courtney J. Martin and Rebecca Peabody's edition of interpretative essays on Alloway, offers an opportunity to compare three very different approaches to writing about art during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Alloway's voice permeates *Lawrence Alloway: Critic and Curator* through the contributors' use of his archive at the Getty). The surprising parallels that emerge prompt consideration about art writing today, and particularly the relationship – now sometimes so close as to be indistinguishable – between art history and criticism.
- 2 The careers of all three are characterised by constant movement between different contexts, especially the academic and the curatorial. Writing by Gowing, Alloway and Ades is as at home in exhibition catalogues as it is in the art press and academic publications. This connection with the curatorial informs their ability to range voraciously across artists and subjects. Lawrence Alloway is well known for his embrace of pluralism. Dawn Ades's groundbreaking work across geographic contexts, notably

Europe and Latin America, has helped shift art history beyond western parameters. Even Lawrence Gowing, inevitably cast as the most conservative figure in such company, passes with ease from William Hogarth (a passion shared with Alloway), through J. M. W. Turner, to Paul Cézanne.

- 3 Significantly, the curatorial alignments traced in these collections are always changing, and museum affiliations never last long. Although Lawrence Alloway secured the post of Curator at the Guggenheim in New York a mere year after his move from Britain to America in 1961, his tenure lasted only until 1966. While Norman Reid appointed Lawrence Gowing Keeper of the Historic British Collection at Tate between 1965 and 1968, he soon returned to teaching painting and freelance exhibition making. Dawn Ades has curated significant exhibitions at multiple museums, but her most consistent institutional affiliation has been with the University of Essex art history department. That they did not spend their whole careers as full-time curators evidently provided time to develop the perspectives gained from exhibitions through writing and teaching, which resonates beyond the brief lifespan of the shows.
- 4 In the interview that opens *Writings on Art and Anti-Art*, Dawn Ades observes that curating 'brings one into direct contact with the objects, something art historians sometimes lack' (p. 12). The effects of this proximity infuse Lawrence Gowing's writing, which also resulted from his own painterly practice. Unsurprisingly, of the three Gowing remains most loyal to visual experience. His 1970 essay *Brueghel's World* demonstrates such an intensely observed response to Brueghel's paintings that it sends you running back to them (I summoned each online as I read, which might have horrified Lawrence Gowing but met with Lawrence Alloway's approval). Yet despite this allegiance to close looking, Gowing undercuts the persuasiveness of his own prose by impressing that much of what he recounts cannot be assimilated into language. A favourite trope is of visual facts resisting consumption: Hogarth is 'hard to digest; he sticks in the critical gullet' (p. 128) and the drawings of Brueghel give the impression 'of something indigestible embodied entire' (p. 62).
- 5 It comes as something of a shock to be reminded Lawrence Alloway and Lawrence Gowing were contemporaries, given Gowing's association with the fug and fog of the Euston Road School of painting. This feels a world away from the transatlantic enthusiasms of Lawrence Alloway, and what Michael Lobel terms his 'geographic mobility' (p. 79). Yet both Alloway and Gowing reacted against the writing of Herbert Read, which they deemed doctrinaire and detached, although their antipathy took them in different directions. Lawrence Gowing's apparent faithfulness to visual experience veils a deeply seductive but problematic insistence that it enables privileged access to the personality of the painter. Jennifer Mundy notes that Lawrence Alloway comparably prioritized "close-up data" (p. 138), but he remained conscious that this was one of many ways through which art acquired value and visibility. As Courtney J. Martin shows in her poignant essay on Alloway's 1966 exhibition *Systemic Painting*, his last at the Guggenheim, this awareness of overarching structural implications could lead not only to a lack of engagement with artworks, but to the impossible paradox of wanting 'viewers to understand something that they could not see – a system' (p. 100).
- 6 Dawn Ades offers an alternative to both Lawrence Gowing's close looking and Lawrence Alloway's de-centralised cultural continuum. Whether writing about the French Surrealists or the Madí group of abstractionists in Argentina, Ades consistently situates specific works within their wider socio-political context, and while, by her own account,

she is not explicitly engaged with theory, she remains acutely attuned to issues of gender and transnationalism. These concerns often powerfully converge, as in the essay 'Orbits of the Savage Moon: Surrealism and the Representation of the Female Subject in Mexico and Postwar Paris' of 1998. Here Ades demonstrates how the paintings of Frida Kahlo and María Izquierdo resist and subvert the claims made for the female body by both the discourses of Mexican nationalism promoted by the muralists, and the eroticised stereotypes celebrated by Surrealism.

- 7 It is fascinating to consider Dawn Ades's writing in relation to the shift in Alloway's work explored by Julia Bryan-Wilson in her essay 'The Present Complex: Lawrence Alloway and the Currency of Museums.' In contrast to Lawrence Gowing, who, despite continuing to write through the 1970s and 1980s, did not engage with women artists or any practitioners outside the Western canon, Bryan-Wilson shows how across the Atlantic Alloway was 'sympathetic and inclusive; in the late 1960s and early 1970s, this inclusion took a decidedly political cast as he began to take seriously work made in the wake of both the civil rights movement and second wave feminism' (p. 168). Dawn Ades came of age in the decade that promoted Lawrence Alloway's period of reassessment, and there is a sense in which her achievements build on, even if not directly, the opening up of curatorial and critical work he pioneered in dialogue with many others. Lucy Bradnock, Courtney J. Martin and Rebecca Peabody's volume thus forms a valuable companion to the 2006 collection of Lawrence Alloway's writings edited by Richard Kalina, but also expands on the existing purview of his impact, and it is a testament to the energising freshness of the essays that they stimulate even more questions about Alloway's engagement with feminism, particularly through his partnership with the artist Sylvia Sleigh, and his encounters with Latin American art.
- 8 Uniting these three different voices, then, is the awareness that roles are not totalizing identities. Lawrence Gowing's experiences as artist, writer and critic inevitably shaped his criticism; Dawn Ades occupies the identities of both art historian and curator. Lawrence Alloway was increasingly aware, as Beatrice von Bismarck recounts, that professional roles within the art world system were "blurring" (p. 156) from the 1970s onwards. Mundy ends her essay on Alloway's teaching with the reflection: 'it was perhaps fittingly symmetrical that he lived to see art history begin to engage self-consciously with the kinds of contemporary political, social, and cultural issues that he always felt should inform and shape the most engaging art criticism, blurring the boundaries between the two fields' (p. 144). Instead of leading us to fret over this 'blurring', the writings of Lawrence Alloway, Dawn Ades and even Lawrence Gowing show how art history, criticism and curating can intertwine productively, albeit under sometimes precarious conditions.