

## Jerry Saltz with Irving Sandler

This July, while spending the summer in New York City, *New York Magazine* art critic Jerry Saltz paid a visit to *Rail* Consulting Editor Irving Sandler's home in the West Village to talk about his life and work.



*Portrait of Jerry Saltz. Pencil on paper by Phong Bui.*

**Irving Sandler (Rail):** You arrived in New York in 1980; where did you come from, and what was your earlier situation in art?

**Jerry Saltz:** I'm from nowhere, which means the suburbs of Chicago. I went to art school in Chicago for a couple of years. I never got a degree—although I was recently given an Honorary Doctorate from the Art Institute of Chicago; I asked them to make me a cardiologist. After dropping out of art school I helped found N.A.M.E. Gallery, an artist-run space in Chicago. I co-curated over seventy-five shows there. Eventually, my artist friends started moving to New York. By 1980, I decided to join them and try to become rich and famous. I was twenty-six at the time, and I thought it was too late already.

**Rail:** What brought you into criticism?

**Saltz:** It was an accident. Charlie Parker said: “If you don’t play the saxophone for a year, you get a year better.” He could have added, “If you don’t play it for two years, you might not be a saxophone player.” After two years of not working at all and fretting about it all the time I stopped making art altogether. I haven’t made it since. I miss it. I miss being able to listen to music while writing, working with materials, and the amazing psychic space making art creates. Soon, I became a long distance truck driver; my CB radio name was the Jewish Cowboy. I’d come on and say “Shalom, partner.” While driving trucks I thought about how much I loved art and the art world. I knew I wanted to be part of that world no matter what. I thought writing criticism would be easy, so I decided to become a critic.

**Rail:** How did you first begin to write?

**Saltz:** I had never written anything in my life. To become a critic I read *Artforum* religiously. I wanted to write the way they wrote in that magazine, which seemed very cool, smart, and reserved, although I was secretly horrified because I barely understood a syllable of what I read. Worse, when I did understand what I read I kept thinking, “These people hate art!” At first I tried to write like that. Whenever I read what I had written afterwards I had no idea what I was talking about. I had all these other thoughts and feelings I wasn’t sharing. That’s when I began to change in my attitude about writing.

**Rail:** You came here to New York at the beginning of Neo-Expressionism. What was your response to it?

**Saltz:** I loved being in New York just as the invisible rigid rules and regulations of the late-70s were being scrapped. In the 1970s you weren’t allowed to paint, or to paint figuratively, and so on. I hated it. The early 1980s was a great time in New York. Things were forming. A generation was taking the stage. One could still be poor but in style. It was a homemade art world; everybody was making it up as they went along. It all had a whole new energy to it. I liked the smell of Schnabel’s oil paintings and the narrative in Fischl’s. I felt similarly about Basquiat and Haring. It took me a while to understand the Pictures artists. I used to be afraid to go into Metro Pictures gallery because it seemed so cool. Nevertheless, I knew right away that I didn’t want to be involved with only one style, medium, or “ism”. I wanted to experience all of it as much as I could. I hated when people said dogmatic things like, “Painting is dead,” or “I only like figuration.” My wife, art critic Roberta Smith, says, “Pleasure is an important form of knowledge.” I totally agree. My ideology is that I hate ideology.

**Rail:** What effect do you want your criticism to have?

**Saltz:** First, I want it to be interesting to read, not just be smart, dodgy, dogmatic, obtuse, or authoritarian. It kills me when someone says, “I started a review of yours and can’t wait to finish it.” When that happens I think I’ve failed; it’s my job to get the reader to read a review from the beginning to the end. Especially on newsprint, which people tend to pick up only once. If I don’t get someone to read me all the way through, I believe it’s my fault, not the reader’s. Other than not being read, the worst thing that can happen is being misread. When someone thinks I’ve liked something that I thought I was saying I disliked, I know something’s way off in the review—not in them) that I wasn’t clear or convincing enough. I like clarity and density. I’m interested in a maximum amount of information in a minimum amount of space.

I can’t stand reviews where you have to read several paragraphs before you even get to the artist’s name. Name the artist in the first paragraph or don’t write about the artist at all. Don’t be a show-off. Worse is when you read a whole review and you don’t really know what a critic thinks; that’s a critic hiding and lying. It’s even more weasel-y to slip one negative phrase into the second to last paragraph of an otherwise neutral or descriptive review. That’s art-critical B.S.. I want every sentence of a review to have either an idea or a judgment. I love description in criticism; that’s one of the hardest and most important parts of criticism. But I want to describe in ways that also contain judgments or ideas. For example, it’s uninteresting to just write, “The painting is square.” It doesn’t take a stand on the squareness of the painting. You need to write something like, “The way so-and-so uses the square is unoriginal” or “repetitious” or whatever. Good criticism places itself in the middle of an argument without it being about the critic. It’s there and invisible.

**Rail:** Does writing come easily to you?

**Saltz:** No. I wish it did, but it doesn’t. I don’t even really think of myself as a writer; I think I’m more of a folk-critic, a raw nerve, or a loudmouth. I agree with the sportswriter Red Smith who wrote, “Writing is easy: You sit down at a typewriter put a piece of paper in ... and open a vein.” For me there is no such thing as writing. There is only re-writing. Before I write I don’t hate anything more than writing. Once I’m writing, I don’t love anything more. When I’m done I often think I’ve written a bullet-proof review. Then, when I read it in print, I cringe at the kinks and flaws. Each week I try to learn from my mistakes and not make them again and again. Other than the love of looking at art, what keeps me going is the desire to write better.

**Rail:** You once said that you measure your success as a critic by the credibility of your writing. Would you talk about that?

**Saltz:** In the beginning, like anyone else, I wanted to be loved. So I was writing for that. After writing a glowing review of someone they'd say, "Oh, come to our party." I went but I always felt like something was missing or inauthentic in that. I wasn't really being myself in my work. That's when I decided to try and write exactly what I was thinking, even if it meant I wouldn't be liked. The difference between power and credibility is that writing for *New York Magazine* may give me power—writing in the most honest way I can hopefully is what gives credibility. Credibility is what cannot be taken away by anyone else.

**Rail:** How many shows do you see in a week?

**Saltz:** Usually, around thirty to forty shows a week. Looking at art is a way that I find out what I am thinking. I love it. I think everyone learns as much from bad art as from good art. I try to go to the Met forty times a year. I love the place on Friday and Saturday evenings. Every time I go I see something I've never seen before. It is my favorite encyclopedic museum of art in the world. The Frick is more like the opening bars of *Gimme Shelter*, something that needs to be experienced at least twice a year.

**Rail:** How do you decide what to write, since you can only do one article a week?

**Saltz:** It's very intuitive and serendipitous. I pay attention to my responses when I'm in galleries and museums. If I'm looking at the new Andreas Gursky show I may hear myself thinking, "Hey, they're all big. Why is that? And they're all glitzy." Then I'll think "They're all also taken from about the same distance. Gursky is in a rut; these things are undermining what he's doing," and so on. A review starts to write itself in my head. Often when looking at art I find myself liking something I thought I wasn't going to like or disliking something I thought I might love. Often when I go back to my desk (I work at home), I go blank and get freaked out. I can't figure out why I thought I had anything original or interesting to say about this work. It's a drag. After being panicked I begin to write. One of the greatest things about weekly deadlines is that there's no time to be a scaredy-cat. You can fret for a half a day but then you have to get down to work. If you can't do that you can't write weekly criticism.

When I do begin to write I try to push all ideas as far as possible, try to allow each one to spool out as far as it can go. I want to get my thinking past good or bad. It's

more interesting to say the movie *Titanic* tells the story of something going from pure horizontality, to perfect verticality to invisibility, than it is to say, “*Titanic* sucks.” I really want the reader to know where I stand and why. I think a writer has to be vulnerable. The illusion that you’re being “objective” is ridiculous. Objectivity is an impossibility. No one is objective about anything. We sell art short if we’re not critical of it. Being critical of art is a way of showing art respect. People are wrong to say: “It’s mean to write a negative review.” On the contrary, it’s a very intimate, even loving thing to do.

**Rail:** We’re in an absolute pluralist situation, where pretty much any kind of art can command, more or less, a fair share of critical attention. Do you consider certain kinds of art more relevant than others?

**Saltz:** I’m always surprised by what I like or dislike. Often I’m embarrassed by my taste. Being from Chicago and not going to art school may explain why I came to modernism late or through the back door, through artists like Ivan Albright, Jim Nutt, Peter Saul, etc.. When I look at my own work I still notice there’s a lag in this area. I like some monochrome painters, for example, but I start to think they’re all the same some, times, or wish that people didn’t always have to refer things to “flatness,” which I don’t think any artist really ever cared about anyway. I think artists are interested in the vision-quest. Maybe artists can’t even help making what they make; as Jasper Johns once said you make what you make when you can’t make anything else, when you’re “helpless.” In this way I think that art uses artists to make it. Like it has a need to exist. Although now I’m sure I sound off-the-wall.

**Rail:** You are very Catholic in your taste.

**Saltz:** I prefer to think that I am polymorphously perverse in my taste. I look at Olafur Eliasson’s weather project in the Tate Modern and know its spectacle and entertainment and that it’s a sun disc but I also see that its real content, *not its subject matter*, is that he created something that allowed English viewers to momentarily stop reveling in shock and figuration and instead bask in abstraction. Too bad his waterfalls were sort of boring. I’m not interested so much in subject matter—otherwise all crucifixions, every Virgin Mary holding a baby Jesus, would be the same—but a Piero della Francesca painting of a pope is very different from a Francis Bacon painting of a Pope. The subject matter may be the same but the content is different. To me, subject matter is the first thing I see in a work of art, and usually it’s the first thing I stop seeing.

**Rail:** You once said that if you never saw another photo-realist painting, that wouldn't make you unhappy [*laughs*].

**Saltz:** I hope I didn't say that [*laughs*]. I love paintings, I love photographs, I love paintings of photographs, I even love photographs of paintings. I think this comes from a column I wrote called "The Richter Resolution." In it I said the idea of using the camera as a tool in painting is great but the tool needs to be used more originally, that it's not enough to just be later-day Warhol, Richter, Doig, Peyton, etc.. I feel this way more than ever. It's weird to me that many of the new artists gaining recognition from China, for example, all seem like bad later-day Photorealists. They're painting Mao instead of gumball machines or whatever. The subject matter may be different but the paintings are the same. And they're boring. It's a joke that people are paying millions for them. Of course, it could be a joke that people are paying millions for any contemporary art.

**Rail:** How about painters like [Chuck] Close, [Richard] Estes, and [Malcolm] Morley in his early works?

**Saltz:** They all did something very different and original with photography and painting. All I'm saying is that painting is one of the greatest visionary tools ever invented. David Hockney once said, "You can't take a photograph of Hell." It seems a shame that a lot of art should start to look alike. Audiences and artists now seem programmed to like things that look a certain way. We're liking art we're already familiar with. It's like the children of celebrities. People already know how they're supposed to appreciate or think about them. The fact that so much art looks familiar and makes people comfortable makes me extremely uncomfortable.

**Rail:** How would you define originality?

**Saltz:** I never say "*MAKE IT NEW!*" I say make it surprising or boring in an interesting way or make it seem to put off more energy than might have gone into making it. A good Pollock is like the burning bush: It burns but doesn't burn out. You don't use it up. Artists can be unoriginal in very original ways. Richard Prince said: "Don't make it new, make it again." I agree. When my students fret that what they're doing has been done before I always say, "Don't worry. See what happens if *you* do it." No words can describe the mystery, mysticism, and power of doing that. I hate it when older teachers tell art students that art used to be good but now it isn't. I tell students to ask those teachers, "When was the last time art was good?" The teachers

usually answer, “When I was your age.” When they say that, a student should smile and imagine them dead.

**Rail:** Is there a distinction between understanding and experiencing art?

**Saltz:** Yes. I disagree with Descartes who said, “I think, therefore I am.” I believe “I *experience*, therefore I am.” Life and art are full body experiences. In Lawrence Wechsler’s, *Vermeer in Bosnia*, he talks about a war crimes judge who went to the Hague to look at Vermeer. Weschler said to him, “You go to the museum to look at those beautiful paintings.” The judge replied, “No, I go there because the Vermeer paintings were invented to heal pain.” Art has many purposes. But for the first 50,000 years of its life, it was meant to make you fertile, to ward off demons, to speak to the dead, to guide you through the afterlife, to protect cities, to make it rain, etc..

**Rail:** Can an Ad Reinhardt ward off demons?

**Saltz:** Well, he’s given me demons [*laughs*]. He’s made me see things I never saw before.

**Rail:** But you also said that you prefer art that asks questions rather than provides answers, and you might say the same about criticism.

**Saltz:** I guess I’m not interested in what people know absolutely. I find that way of thinking frightening and annoying. One thing I know is that every new generation reinvents all the previous ones.

**Rail:** Which critics have influenced you? Which of them have you found interesting over the decades? There’s now a show at the Jewish Museum based on the artists championed by Greenberg and Rosenberg. The show attempts to rehabilitate Rosenberg.

**Saltz:** My wife said that writing weekly is like performing live as opposed to writing monthly, which is like recording in the studio. I read almost all the weekly critics in New York and elsewhere. I like anyone who puts out opinions in their work. That means sports writers, music critics, etc.. I can’t imagine reading a sports writer who’d say everything the Yankees did last night was good. Or a food critic who liked every meal or every Asian meal. That’s a critic lying.

When I read an art critic I’m always thinking about what they saw that I missed or vice versa. These days I’m finding it hard to read *Artforum* again. The articles seem

too long and removed from art. There's something academic at the root of this, the cleaning up of reactions, the reigning in of art. Maybe critics aren't self-taught enough and aren't trusting their own reactions. The reviews are mainly positive, neutral, or descriptive. If people seem to dislike about 80% of all shows, why are 80% of all reviews good? I admit to liking all the ads; they're like art porn. I think it's great that an art magazine might be making money. I just hope the critics aren't still being paid paltry sums for reviews and articles. That'd be a crime.

**Rail:** Do you like Dave Hickey's work?

**Saltz:** Yes, but I don't think of him as an art critic. I never look to Hickey for newer work. He's more our Emerson, a philosopher critic-cowboy.

**Rail:** How do you interact with artists that you write about?

**Saltz:** I talk to artists, of course, but I don't talk to artists when I write about them. I think a critic should put out his or her own ideas, not parrot back the artist's. I will say that I've never met an inarticulate artist, ever. They all have something to say in some weird way that I find very brilliant. For instance, Brice Marden once said, "The word 'pain' is in the word 'painting.'" When I read this I thought, "Holy shit, I never thought of that before." Whatever the hell it means.

**Rail:** It seems to me that the major taste-making power in the art world, deciding what was important, what was good or bad in the '50s was in the hands of artists. In the early '60s, there was a shift to critics, most of whom were influenced by Greenberg and wrote for *Artforum*. Then, in the '70s and '80s, the power shifted to dealers, and in the '90s, to collectors, and today, to the art market. In the process, criticism seems to have become marginalized. Does that bother you?

**Saltz:** If criticism is marginalized, then it's the best thing that could ever happen. It means that critics have to write better (to get the reader's respect) and that they're free to write whatever they want. I can write that Damien Hirst's last paintings were no good, and it does absolutely nothing to his sales. I can praise the work of a young artist and it doesn't change his or her market or career too much. I think that more critics should realize this; we're free, which is great. I don't think that there's a crisis in criticism, but I do think curators are more often the weakest link in the chain. The same sixteen curators assemble all the shows all over the world, showing the same sixteen artists. It's horrible and frustrating. If you're not on the circuit you can't get in the circuit. That's bad. I see a lot of mid-career artists who have done something

for years get passed over for a much younger artist doing essentially the same thing. I see younger artists getting passed over simply because another curator hasn't given them the stamp of approval. There's a cruel Russian joke from the early 1990s: "If you see a Bulgarian, kick him. He'll know why." That's often how I feel about curators. A lot of them are great but the profession is in a rut. I find this completely frustrating, especially at a time when good art is being made everywhere, not just in Berlin and New York or by hip names with good galleries. Artists take risks with real conviction in their studios every day. That's what I want from everybody— including curators.

**Rail:** Another thing that critics can do is to critique the art world, its institutions and practices. Most critics don't dare. They fear taking on Tom Krens, for example, the way you took him on.

**Saltz:** I don't think there's anything to be afraid of. I think that if Tom Krens or Glenn Lowry doesn't like you or what you write and you're not invited to the dinners, that's fine. Of course I want to be liked; I'm not a sociopath. But, I think that when I write about problems at MoMA, the Guggenheim, or wherever, these thoughts are often already on everybody's mind, including the people in these institutions. I imagine that when I wrote that it was horrific that MoMA didn't build a project space I'm sure many people at MoMA were horrified by that too. As with art, criticizing institutions is a way to show them respect.

**Rail:** There seems to be an element of self-analysis and self-discovery in your criticism.

**Saltz:** I hope so. Again, I don't know what I think until I write it, and then I'm always surprised by my thoughts, and kind of ashamed, thrilled and mortified at the same time. I try to learn about what I'm afraid of, the responses I have that frighten me, and not only for the sake of self-improvement, since even degeneration and mistakes are forms creativity. There's a great story about Piet Mondrian where even though he knew he was dying, he went into the studio and dismantled a masterpiece because he wanted to develop his idea further. Similarly, Pollock only painted his [drip] paintings in earnest for maybe four years, and then he went willingly back to hell, returning to figuration. It's hard to go back to hell, to try something new in one's work, but it's important. I mean you don't want to be on automatic pilot like Jim Dine.

**Rail:** We talked about varied mediums and the fact that you deal with all of them and really don't prefer one over another, but is it possible to stay on top of all of them: painting, sculpture, photography, video, performance, installation, and so on?

**Saltz:** Yes and no. Everything is teaching you about itself all the time. In a way what painting is teaching you isn't essentially different from what a video is teaching you. Again, this goes back to the idea of seeing as much art as possible, being open to it, and understanding that all art is contemporary art, from cave painting to whatever's in galleries today. It's there now. All we have to do is let our reactions be our guides. Six months ago at the Met I was a freak for everything Oceanic. In the last month I've gone on a Greek kick. Sometimes I just look at old pictures of Paris in the 1870s and pine.

**Rail:** I do that too, Jerry, and I've written extensively on photography. But when I think of doing a major article, it's generally on painting or sculpture.

**Saltz:** Well, weekly criticism precludes that. You sort what's being served up. I don't think I could gain any credibility for being the painting critic or the sculpture critic in the same way that it's hard to have credibility if you're just the Asian critic or the black critic. Also, we all have our first and second languages, then our third and fourth languages. I have prejudices, of course. I've never written on pottery yet I love it and some of the most important works of art of the twentieth century are pottery. Duchamp's Urinal is ceramic, so is Merit Oppenheim's fur-lined teacup, so are a lot of Jeff Koons sculptures.

**Rail:** You're probably the first person to ever call Duchamp a ceramic artist.

**Saltz:** The great Garth Clark pointed it out.

**Rail:** We started this interview by talking about your coming on the art scene around 1980. How do you view the development of art since then?

**Saltz:** I love that we're now living in a kind of Wikipedia art world. This is the best thing that could ever happen. Everyone is contributing from everywhere all the time. Many of the entries are no good, of course, or are bogus, but that's okay. Things will get sorted out. The point is there isn't only one or two acceptable styles or authorities deciding what the styles are; there aren't only twelve famous artists, most of them male, most from New York. There aren't only six art dealers, seven collectors, and four critics. Things aren't open entirely but they're more open than they've ever been. They're far from perfect, of course. You'll know the art world is getting integrated

when there are as many bad black artists as there are bad white artists. That'll be a great day.

While people say New York is dead, I'd argue that the idea that New York is dead, is dead. I think New York is alive and porous. It is much harder to be poor in style here nowadays. But artists are finding ways of doing this. I'm tired of people in London or Berlin telling me New York is dead and that we're about the market. Get a grip, I tell them. The market is a fact. We need it, it needs us, blah, blah, blah. London and Berlin are as much "about the market" as we are. Maybe more.

**Rail:** What should criticism be doing today?

**Saltz:** Be partial, passionate, and open to paradox.

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*Jerry Saltz's upcoming book, Selected Essays: 2003-2007, will be published in Spring of 2009 by Hard Press Editions.*

IRVING SANDLER was an art critic, art historian, and writer. The second volume of his memoirs, *Swept Up By Art: An Art Critic in the Post-Avant-Garde Era*, was published by Rail Editions in 2015.

<https://brooklynrail.org/2008/09/art/jerry-saltz-in-conversation-with-irving-sandler>