RABKIN READER

A good place to start

MARY LOUISE SCHUMACHER
June 25

Editors Brandon Sheats, Brandon Zech, Amelia Rina and Jameson Johnson discuss the future of arts writing at Arrival in North Adams, Mass.

Good morning, arts writers and Rabkin community.

Art worlders love a good anti-fair art fair, and much of the art press has been spilling admiring adjectives for one of the latest, called Arrival, which debuted in the Berkshires earlier this month. It's warranted praise, and you can read about the women-led ethos, the invitational model, the powerhouse list of curatorial ambassadors (including

Portland's own **Sayantan Mukhopadhyay**) – and the art – in **ARTnews**, **The Berkshire Eagle**, **Cultured**, **The Boston Globe**, **The Art Newspaper** and elsewhere.

As wonderful as it was, what inspired me to wend west in my Beetle was something else entirely. I went to hear next-generation art publishers think together in public.

In an old farmhouse-turned-lounge just beyond the main action of the fair, a group of regional art publishers from across the U.S. unpacked the priorities and pressures of their work and offered what could be a glimpse around the corner for arts writing.

The panelists for a talk on the future of arts publishing included **Jameson Johnson**, founder and executive director of the **Boston Art Review**; **Amelia Rina**, founder and editor of **Variable West**; **Brandon Sheats**, executive director of **Burnaway**; and **Brandon Zech**, publisher of **Glasstire**.

Filling a void left by the near evaporation of local arts writing, these publishers and editors are close-to-the-ground, passionate advocates for place and community. They are rigorous, creative, collaborative, multi-platform thinkers that are finding their way to new audiences.

In a long WhatsApp thread and weekly Zooms, they've been sharing knowledge and building trust for about two years, all of which culminated in an announcement at Arrival, the soft launch of a new association, the **Regional Art Publishers**. The group also includes **Lindsay Preston Zappas**, founder and editor-in-chief of Contemporary Art Review Los Angeles, or **Carla**, who was not able to attend due to a gala celebration marking 10 years of existence.

These publications can be, in their way, as rigorous as the heady art journals and as dedicated to accessibility and accountability as a local newspaper while somehow managing to be an improvement on both in some respects. They are generally less provincial in either case, for instance.

“We’re in the middle of a massive realignment that provides a lot of opportunities if you’re paying attention,” said Sheats, referring not only to arts publishing but the ways we define and engage with art more broadly. “I deeply believe that across the art industry, the gallery system, the nonprofit space, that we are undergoing a very large realignment that started back in the early 2000s with museums … and because of this realignment, there are new rules and new ways to do everything… .”

I’ll buy that (and made **a film** about that). But in a media landscape that, at least for the moment, favors big stories and national publications, these upstarts have had to be especially inventive about locating their audiences.

“The real crisis of art writing is a shared crisis among publications and institutions in which we are losing audience,” said Sheats. “It is happening in real time.”

As much as these publications have in common, their strategies for reaching audiences might be where they vary most, a reflection of the particularities of their leadership or regions, perhaps. From Burnaway’s collaboration with **Art21** to Boston Art Review’s big dance parties and work with the mayor’s office, there is much to learn from these often bespoke, nonalgorithmic, and at times intimate approaches.

Despite such successes, these independent publications carry a lot.

“We’re all trying to cull from a community of writers that has nowhere else to publish,” said Zech. “So we are having to do the entire work of training these writers, onboarding them, teaching them how to pitch, teaching them to work with publications, teaching them that when an editor edits their work it’s for their benefit … . We've kind of become full service organizations in ways that organizations of our operating budgets and sizes were never necessarily meant to be.”

“It gets harder and harder for us because we do have small staffs,” said Sheats, noting that Burnaway covers a region that is a quarter of the landmass of the country with a

staff of three and a budget of less than $300,000. “That would be laughable at an art magazine. That would be laughable at a general interest publication.”

“Or at any arts organization that serves that number of people,” chimed in Johnson. “Or serves one city,” added Zech.

In a context that also includes the cancellation of millions in federal grants and shifts in funding priorities across the arts, these publications are increasingly on their own when it comes to financial support.

“There has been a shift in funding priorities for big funders,” Johnson said, noting that some publications have shuttered as a result.

What perhaps interests me most about these publications and others like them is the internal work they’re doing, reflecting on the context of the American South or New England or Texas or “the West.” This is important work. It’s one of the reasons the Rabkin Foundation has always looked deeply into the U.S. to find those writers who show up consistently in their communities to bear witness to what artists do, writers who might run into the people they write about at the supermarket check-out.

The art that flows to the art world’s proving grounds can be magnificent, but it is, because of the systems that underlie those spaces, deeply limited, too. Local and regional art publications are uniquely concerned with art’s origin stories, distinctive pockets of creation where others may not be paying attention.

If you want a more expansive view of art – and the audiences who might care about it – focusing on the context of *place* can be a good place to start.

We can all support this kind of work by giving our attention intentionally. If you’ve read more than one piece about the new Frick this year but nothing about how Caribbean artists are inspired by the destructive force of hurricanes or about an OG and

under-recognized bioartist at Roswell, you may want to consider a shift in your reading habits. Also, as always, subscribe, become a member, advertise, share, tell others. Figure out how to make these things a regular part of your life.

Meanwhile, while these publishing leaders suggest there is a shrinking universe of funders that support arts writers or publications, we continue to hear informally from individuals and organizations at the local level who feel quite directly the impact of evaporating arts writing and want to address it. So, for those of you who happen to be connected to nonprofits invested in local or regional art ecosystems, consider starting a conversation at the community level about how to support arts writing. We are collaborating on a toolkit that will outline some of the current models for this, so hit “reply” and hit me up for that, too.