

Inside an unquiet mind

Essays on the critic and curator Lawrence Alloway give a minor figure too much credit

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Lawrence Alloway, then a curator at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, speaks at Oberlin College, Ohio, in 1965. Courtesy: Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

Of all the minor figures in the history of art criticism, perhaps none is as deserving of his footnote in the annals as the British writer and curator Lawrence Alloway (1926-90). Although he is best known for supposedly coining the term “Pop art” (in fact, no one knows where the phrase originated), Alloway is more important for the small role he played in ushering in the criticism that plagues us today: the type so obsessed with the noise of the art world that it forgets the work entirely.

In Alloway’s mind, works of art were “historical documents”, as he put it in 1964—relics, that is, to be unearthed and decoded by the critic as anthropologist. As the art historian Jennifer Mundy explains in an essay in *Lawrence Alloway: Critic and Curator*, which looks at his work in comprehensive detail, he called for “a criticism that provided objective descriptions of works and forensic analyses of cultural contexts”. For Alloway, art was an indicator of a system. Beyond that, it was irrelevant.

Today, it is Alloway who is irrelevant, and the nine art historians who have contributed to this book (edited by Lucy Bradnock, Courtney Martin and Rebecca Peabody) are far too generous to a man whose ideas were largely stillborn. Yet he did have his moment. In the early 1950s, Alloway was close to the Pop-art pioneers of the Independent Group in London, which included the artists John McHale and Eduardo Paolozzi.

By 1954, Alloway was the assistant director of London's Institute of Contemporary Arts. But his heart was set on the US, where the popular arts—"the most remarkable and characteristic achievements of industrial society", he wrote—were blooming. In 1961, he made the jump to Bennington College in southern Vermont, where he stayed for only one year before being hired as a curator by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. He remained there until 1966.

From his Guggenheim perch—and, later, as a professor at the State University of New York at Stony Brook—Alloway surveyed the art world with cold, scientific detachment. He favoured writing that was "not distracted by cultural melodramas or modern sensibility, but with up-close data". He urged for "sociological pieces" of criticism from which judgement was absent. "I think good art is mainly a lot of shit, you know," he told an interviewer in 1973, and Alloway never wanted to get his hands too dirty.

As early as 1954, an anonymous reviewer of his first book, *Nine Abstract Artists: Their Work and Theory*, chafed at Alloway's "extreme objectivity" and compared his book to "a field report from a Martian anthropologist". So it is a surprise to read the art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson argue that Alloway was never a "detached or 'neutral' observer", but instead a "reflexive scholar" who ruminated on his own position in the art-world system.

In a sense, Bryan-Wilson is right: Alloway was so deeply enmeshed in the market he traded in that he never saw the art he was meant to be looking at. In 1962, Clement Greenberg saw Alloway's failure with clear eyes: he seemed to "lack a sense of perspective", which made him an "inveterate futurist, [a] votary of false dawns". His frenzied mind, which was preoccupied with looking at the art world as a networked system, could not be quieted.

The task of criticism, which Alloway never lived up to, is discrimination: the careful prying-apart of what matters from what does not. Alloway knew that context was important—it affects how art is seen—and this is the basis of his network theory. But networks are built of moving parts. They never allow for the stillness that reflection demands.

Alloway was unable to focus because he believed that everything was relevant, but this is not the case. The world—and the art world, too—is a noisy place, and serious thought requires a quiet mind. The writer Leon Wieseltier said it best: "Beware

distraction. Nothing serious can be accomplished unless something is excluded from one's vision."

Lawrence Alloway: Critic and Curator

Lucy Bradnock, Courtney Martin and Rebecca Peabody (eds)

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