

Accessible as Humanly Possible

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“I’m just really at a loss at this point,” tweeted film critic April Wolfe on December 28, 2017. The newly bought *LA Weekly*, from which she and 9 of 13 editorial staffers were fired in November, had just published three reviews she wrote while still on staff there. Then it summed up an end-of-year retrospective of articles mostly by fired writers with the phrase “a new year brings new hope and determination.”¹ Former music columnist Jeff Weiss calls the pub’s new, largely Orange County-based, all-male, mostly libertarian owners “Vichy *LA Weekly*” and daily updates his twitter followers on the pub’s output (or lack thereof)—old articles with new dates deceptively assigned to them kept appearing on the homepage of the once-storied alt paper. I wrote for the publication for seven years but now feel like a confused outsider, watching to see what happens next.

Publications, even seemingly thriving ones, die all the time, sometimes before they technically cease circulating. Renata Adler wrote that *The New Yorker* died in the 1990s, when, in her eyes, it stopped putting the “curiosity and energy” of editors and writers above concerns of advertisers.² From that perspective, some cynics argued, most mainstream publications were dead already.³ But in the realm of alt weeklies and local news, the death knells clanging right now suggest something of a national blood bath. “We weren’t expecting the red wedding,” tweeted former editor-in-chief Mara Shaloup the day she and her *LA Weekly* staff lost their jobs. The

Village Voice published its last print edition in August 2017, right before the *LAist*, *Gothamist*, and associated publications (essentially the online-only siblings to local weeklies) were abruptly shut down; the *Baltimore City Paper* shuttered; and *City Paper* in Washington DC went up for sale. *The Awl* and *The Hairpin*, not local but certainly alt, closed down in mid-January.

In late December, journalist Mark Oppenheimer wrote an op-ed for the *LA Times*, in which he described the formula that made alt weeklies what they were as “free + local politics + local arts.”⁴ The local arts part is its own loss, exacerbating a problem that has been growing for the past half century anyway: the siloing of art worlds from other worlds, so that conversations about visual art in particular become accessible only to the initiated.

Much of the grappling—like Kate Knibbs’ article for *The Ringer*, or the panel on “Who’s Covering L.A.” held at the Annenberg School—focus on the loss of alternative civic news. This is understandable given that the number of widely circulated papers in SoCal dropped from five to two in just three years, thus crippling democracy and diversity. Still, privileging civics implicitly suggests that arts writing is less crucial to lively, democratic city life, and emphasizes the very assumption that alt weeklies warded off for longer than most publication genres. “Separating the cultural from the political,” wrote longtime former *LA Weekly* editor Harold Meyerson, “is often a fool’s errand.”⁵

“Jonathan Gold had to go to the *LA Times* from *LA Weekly*. It wouldn’t have worked the other way around,” a friend commented recently, noting how the *Weekly*’s agile institutional structure gave critics a permission rarely available at larger, bureaucratic papers. And populist cultural coverage thrives when it can be agile—the work of John Perrault, Jill Johnston, Ella Taylor, Ron Athey and other alt paper alums shows that.



“Beautiful, efficient, sarcastic!” wrote Perreault in 1968, in a gleeful *Village Voice* piece about an anonymous artist’s installation at an anarchic Lower East Side alt space.⁶ He’d just observed the word “serial” stenciled on each stair landing (a quite literal joke). In its prime, the publication willingly offered space to local art experiences that had no commercial value, and questionable clout. Two years later, music critic Tom Johnson reviewed songs of a thrush outside his window in the same issue of the *Voice* in which reporter Howard Blum wrote of mafia gun-running in the Middle East. That version of the *Voice*, in which arts coverage critiqued social values while reportage dug into political realities, started fading sometime in the 1990s, and then more so when the corporate New Times bought it in 2005.⁷

“There should be other options for those of us who do critical work,” Jen Graves, former critic at the Seattle-based alt weekly *The Stranger*, told *ARTNews* last year, right after she

resigned from the job she’d held since 2006. She’d been asked, increasingly, to write less critically about general art and pop culture. “Instead there seems to be a real, somewhat unfounded misunderstanding and disregard for what we bring to a city.”⁸ The corporate acquirers of alt pubs can push general audience critics back toward art mags and ivory towers, though there’s not necessarily room for them there either.

In 2002, a group of critics, most of whom spent their careers in academic and institutional art worlds, debated their own field’s narrowness for the 100th issue of *October*, a magazine intentionally more specialized than the oft-inscrutable *Artforum*. Curator Helen Molesworth worried about how theory-laden criticism had become: “Is, then, that sense of the diminishment of the audience for criticism partly bound up with this sense of criticism’s academicization? So now it’s for students?”⁹ Historian David Joselit agreed that this

“academicization” “encourages scholars to stay within narrowly defined discursive channels,” narrowing readership as a result.¹⁰

A *Village Voice* anthology has been sitting on my bed stand. The range of eccentric and politically charged ideas in it, made accessible by clear-headed literary voices, is gratifying—the basic sensibility, the opposite of the one Joselit ascribes to academia, suggests that a general audience can understand anything if the writer works to make it possible.

The crumbling of local pubs makes readability all the more crucial. Art writers have an obligation to fight the narrowness and marginalization of our profession if we want lively, thoughtful local dialogue about culture. “I have always had a tortured relationship with writing because of the desire to have the language that’s formed around artists to be accessible as humanly possible, and seeing so much of it not be,” said curator Jamillah James one morning in early November, speaking as part of an art writing panel at The Convening, a conference organized in downtown L.A. by the non-profit Common Field.¹¹ “We need to move away from writing to an art audience,” she continued later on. “As a curator, I think about a public, a diverse group of people.”¹²

“I agree in a general sense,” said Sarrita Hunn, co-founder of *Temporary Art Review*. “[T]here’s also a way that through writing you create a public.”¹³

This has indeed been how a small group of new alternative art publications grew their readership over the past few years—offering a perspective absent in their community, attracting an audience as a result. It is feasible, if still very challenging, to do this within one field, where you know at least that your subject matter interests a niche readership. But in her 1999 diatribe against *The New Yorker*, Renata Adler argued that any readership for arts content grows in the same way, by readers finding then returning to a well-developed voice that attracts them: “An audience, for anything in the

arts, does not pre-exist. It is part of what is created.” When “pollsters” start trying to “determine the preferences of some imaginary, pre-existing and statistically desirable new readership,” she writes, publications lose pull.¹⁴

This year, in their annual list of the art world’s “least powerful,” the online art pub *Hyperallergic* listed at number seven, “Arts & Local Journalists,” citing the shutdowns and sales of alt weeklies and the “ist” sites (*LAist*, *Gothamist*, etc.). Often *Hyperallergic* has included critics on its powerless list but never combined with news writers. Arguably, *Hyperallergic*, which pays on average 10 cents a word and edits unevenly, is part of the problem, producing content but offering marginal support. But it was perhaps on to something by grouping the failing arts writers with the lost news outlets.

Small alternative art publications that are attempting to pay writers decently and craft thoughtful, diverse commentary might serve as models for new general interest local pubs. As models, they’re modest to the core: no ambitions to start an empire; ads sold for sustainability only (not allowed to drive content, as has happened at so many art glossies); respectful rates paid to writers, but not salaries. (“They weren’t making a living but they were doing what they want to do,”¹⁵ Ed Fancher said of staffers who kept the *Village Voice* alive in its early years). That writers for alt platforms can’t make livings without hustling is inarguably terrible, but before it sold, the long-turned-corporate *LA Weekly*’s per word rate for contractors was often worse than that at art publications *Momus* and *Carla* (this pub).

Now that the corporately-owned *LA Times* has suddenly, seemingly, become the only dominant general interest publication in this particular city, we need models openly defiant of such trickle-down structures. They seem among the only ways to ensure democracy in our local coverage. Such democracy requires mutual respect and cross-disciplinary

1. Brette Callwood, “Good Riddance 2017! This Year Was Tough on Pretty Much Everyone,” Dec. 28, 2017, *LA Weekly*, <http://www.laweekly.com/news/good-riddance-2017-the-year-was-tough-on-pretty-much-everyone-in-la-8998318>.

2. Renata Adler, *Gone the Last Days of the New Yorker* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 12.

3. Michael Wolff made this point in “Mr. Shawn’s Last Tribe,” an article on Adler published in *New York Magazine* in 2000.

collaboration between politics reporters and culture writers (happening already at publications like *L.A. Taco*). It also requires deep respect for local readers, an assumption that if writers put the work into accessibly fleshing out nuanced cultural realities, readers will care—assuming an audience is willing to engage with complexity, just not jargon.

I remember a strange weekend in the desert that I had meant to spend hiking. Instead I spent frantic, long hours revising an essay for *LA Weekly*. It had been too opaque and niche when I turned it in, my editor told me, rightly. I was responding to an *L.A. Times* review that I'd found wrong, sexist, and annoying, but my response required explaining how the historical marginalization of female mystics has been exacerbated by things like exhibition design. I was also arguing that properly acknowledging these women might require a new kind of language. Making all of this accessible to someone who might, say, pick up the paper at a Hollywood coffee shop proved all-consuming. But how thrilling, and necessary, to make sense to people different from oneself.

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4. Mark Oppenheimer, "Fiercely Local Alt-Weeklies are Worth Fighting For," Dec. 7, 2017, *LA Times*, followed by link: <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-oppenheimer-alt-weeklies-20171207-story.html>

5. Harold Myerson, "LA Weekly without left-wing politics is like Hamlet without the prince," Dec. 24, 2017, *LA Times*, followed by link: <http://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-oppenheimer-alt-weeklies-20171207-story.html>

6. John Perreault, "More Than Eyes to Please," in *The Village Voice Anthology (1956-1982)*, ed. by Geoffrey Stokes (New York: Quill, 1982), 311.

7. After purchasing the *Voice*, New Times, which also owned *LA Weekly* until last November, changed its name to Voice Media.

8. Andrew Russeth, "Seattle's Jen Graves Resigns as Art Critic for the Stranger," *ARTNews*, Feb. 2, 2017, <http://www.artnews.com/2017/02/08/seattles-jen-graves-resigns-as-art-critic-of-the-stranger/>.

9. "Round Table: The Present Conditions of Art Criticism," *October* 100 (2002), 221.

10. Ibid.

11. Jamillah James as transcribed by Simone Krug, *Art Writing: Sustainability, Taste Making and Critical Art Discourses*, organized by Gelare Khoshgozaran, Common Field Convening, Nov. 4, 2017.

12. Ibid.

13. Sarrita Hunn as transcribed by Simone Krug, *Art Writing: Sustainability, Taste Making and Critical Art Discourses*, organized by Gelare Khoshgozaran, Common Field Convening, Nov. 4, 2017.

14. Adler, 12. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 2.

15. Edwin Fancher, interview with John Berman and Roberta Gratz, Greenwich Village Historical Preservation Society, Jan. 26, 2000. http://www.gvshp.org/_gvshp/resources/doc/fancher_transcript.pdf.