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## Eleanor Heartney: Art as a Vehicle

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We are pleased to have with us Eleanor Heartney, independent art critic and scholar, contributing editor to *Art in America*, recipient of the College Art Association's Frank Jewett Mather Award for distinction in art criticism in 1992. She has been widely and extensively published on contemporary art, and has lectured in major universities and museums such as the Whitney Museum, the Parsons School of Design, the Chicago Art Institute, the University of Massachusetts, abroad at Korean University, and much more.

# ELEANOR HEARTNEY

## ART AS A VEHICLE

Interview by LEDA CEMPELLINI  
Associate Professor of Art History at  
South Dakota State University

to stay, and then I gradually worked my way into the New York art world. It is exactly thirty years now.

**Would you like to expand on your editorial role in *Art in America*, and how your art criticism benefits from that?**

I am involved with magazines like *Art in America* in the US and *Art Press* in France. It is writing for those publications that keep me on the edge of what's happening. I think there is

art is so diverse now and has so many different threads and narratives, I organize my thinking around some of the larger ideas that are important in the world, and how artists have a way to help us understand that idea.

**One of the themes you are approaching in a future project deals with relationship between art and religion: what is the thread of your reflection?**

My favorite project is the one I feel least appreciated, a book that I wrote about Catholicism and contemporary art, titled *Post-Modern Heretics*. It was published about ten years ago by a little publisher, *Mid March Arts Press*. Besides Amazon, the book does not have a wide circulation, but it had a bit of cult following, because it is a topic of great interest to people.

The book project came out of my observations during the cultural wars of the early Nineties, when most of the artists that were getting into trouble politically in the United States came from Catholic backgrounds. For many years through the Modern and the Postmodern periods, there has been this assumption that religion and art have nothing to do with each other, that artists if anything are anti-religious. It is much more complicated relationship and that's what the book is about. Catholics are much more interested in issues of the body and sexuality and they express them in ways that tends to be seen as transgressive. That's why people like Mapplethorpe, Serrano, Finley, Gober got into trouble. It is a topic I am coming back to; my most recent project is a book on art and the apocalyptic imagination, which is about the larger notion of the world coming to an end. Artists such as Keith Haring, Matthew Ritchie, and Roger Brown, to make just a few examples.

**How has art criticism changed in these last years, and what do you suggest to young people who want to approach the profession of art critic?**

I came to realize that you become an art critic by writing about art. An important aspect of the current crisis in art criticism is that with the proliferation of different formats, from blogs to online magazines, it is becoming less and less likely to get paid for your writing. The old-fashioned magazines still do that, but the new ones don't, and this creates a real problem for young people. You can't think about writing as a way to make a living, but one aspect of the larger picture. Start your own magazine, or exhibition space or public program. Right now, the system is in disarray, with so much art, so many voices, so many places where people are commenting on art. For young people, it is an opportunity to recreate the system, because the system is now in flux.

Just because that's the way it was always done, it does not mean it will be done that way in the future, so you have to think about it in different ways.



I grew up in Des Moines, which is a small but progressive city in Iowa, with an excellent art center. I took a lot of art classes, and I even considered at one point becoming an artist. Because I was also into philosophy, literature, and other disciplines, I got a Master's in art history from the University of Chicago, thinking that maybe this was a good preparation for museum work. I never thought about being a critic until I moved to Minneapolis. I lived there for a couple of years, and that's where I got involved in writing about art, by looking into the regional contemporary art scene. I was also in contact with the *New Art Examiner*, a publication based in Chicago. I did quite a bit of writing about art, until I realized it just wasn't enough to live on, and also I wanted to know more. In 1983, some friends were moving to New York; I decided to go, too, because I had a place

a difference between being an art critic versus an art historian, because you really have to stay aware of what's going on and try things before there is consensus about them.

**Let's think at your book *Art & Today*: in your perspective, what is the main function of art nowadays? What is your thought process on art critic, how do you make all these thematic connections that are in the book?**

You are right, I tend to think thematically. What interests me about art is that it is a way of understanding larger issues in the world. For me, a lot of times it starts from something outside in the world, and artists respond to the world. If it is an issue that is important in our culture has been dealt with by writers, political thinkers, musicians, there should be artists working on it as well, and often from a very interesting viewpoint. Because contemporary