

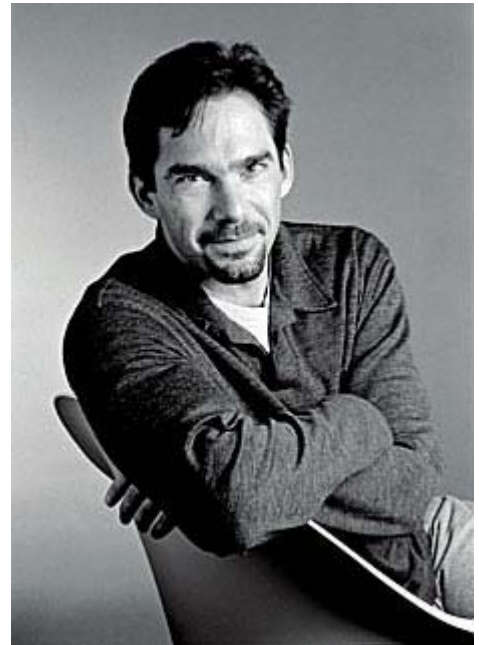


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The body eclectic

A new book by Lawrence Rinder reveals an unorthodox thinker with wide-ranging tastes.

By Andrea K. Scott



“I have no idea what art is,” writes Lawrence Rinder in the introduction to his new book, *Art Life: Selected Writings 1991–2005*. That’s a surprising claim for a man who began his career in MoMA’s education department, spent 12 years as a museum curator in the Bay Area and is probably best known to New Yorkers for curating the 2002 Whitney Biennial. But this is not a case of false modesty. Rinder’s words represent a rare, even radical willingness to see first and know later, to meet art on its own terms instead of on his. This open-mindedness is evident in the essays in his book, whose far-flung topics include the blackboard drawings of anthroposophist Rudolf Steiner, the history of gay and lesbian art in America, and Luc Tuymans’s paintings. *TONY* called the 44-year-old Rinder, now director of graduate studies at the California College of the Arts, at his office in San Francisco to talk about art, life and the ’80s East Village.

The subjects in your book are so varied. What ties your interests together?

I was concerned when I was putting the book together that it would be overly eclectic, but that’s just the nature of my life, my career and my interests. What comes through, I hope, in all of the essays, which is indicated by the title, is an engagement with art that speaks to lived experience in a very direct, visceral, sometimes emotional, often political way.

Did you ever consider a career as a critic?

I did, very early on. After I got out of college in 1983 I was living in the East Village. I had a degree in studio art from Reed College, in performance of all things. In New York, I appeared in a piece that Marianne Weems did at 8BC. I think I had to play a cello in my underwear or something. [*Laughs*] But my ambition was to get a job as a waiter and write poetry.

But how did you start writing about art?

I couldn't get a job as a waiter; I had no skills. So, through a friend's connection, I got a job in the education department at MoMA. But I wasn't "at" MoMA. I was out in the schools all over the city learning probably more about art than I did at college, and I was also involved in the East Village scene, especially around the gallery Nature Morte. I was very inspired by Peter [Nagy] and Alan [Belcher] at the time. Their project never resolved clearly into a firm ideological position. They would complicate things, showing Sherrie Levine one day and Kevin Larmon the next.

There's an essay on Larmon's paintings in the book.

The first piece of criticism I ever wrote was a review of the Guber-Larmon show for *Flash Art*. I also ended up writing for a now-defunct magazine called *Manhattan, Inc.* that embodied mid-to-late-'80s New York life—a very interesting magazine, actually. A sort of high-finance, gossipy thing, but with very good art coverage. So I was thinking maybe I'd become an art critic, maybe I'd become an art educator. But I ended up becoming a museum curator after getting an NEA fellowship to work at the Walker Art Center in 1987.

You make some unexpected connections in your writing. At one point, you compare the chart drawings of Mark Lombardi to the "mannerist excesses" of John Currin's paintings. Are the artists ever caught off guard?

Not that I've heard about. I think artists are frustrated by how quickly their work is encapsulated into a kind of received notion, then historicized, packaged and canonized. If there's a role that a critic or a curator can play, it's to constantly reshuffle the deck.

Lawrence Rinder will read from Art Life: Selected Writings 1991-2005 at White Columns on Monday 31, followed by a conversation with curator Bill Arning, and artists A.A. Bronson and Andrea Fraser.