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Rinder's essays remind us of his Berkeley Art Museum triumphs

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Many, perhaps most, art exhibition catalog texts do not merit reprinting in anthologies. But people who have tracked the career of Lawrence Rinder admiringly since his late '80s days as Matrix program curator at the Berkeley Art Museum will be delighted to see his most significant essays collected in "Art Life: Selected Writings, 1991-2005" (Gregory R. Miller/D.A.P.; 160 pages; \$25).

A glance at the well-illustrated book's table of contents reminds us what a great run of shows Rinder had at BAM. His ahead-of-the-curve essay on Rosie Lee Tompkins' quilts is here. So are memorable texts on Rudolf Steiner's chalkboard diagrams, the drawings of Luc Tuymans and the one from "In a Different Light," a still-illuminating discussion of "gay content" in 20th century art.

"I was initially drawn to art as an alternative to suicide," Rinder writes in his introduction. Who could resist such an opener?

He goes on to admit not knowing what "art" is, beyond "a zone of permission."

"It is enervating," he writes, "to witness the rush of young artists generating globally-informed, media-savvy, interdisciplinary works that ultimately speak to no one but curators and academics."

That probably helps explain his resignation from the Whitney Museum of American Art after four years as a senior curator. In 2004 he returned to the Bay Area as California College of the Arts' dean of graduate studies. He had been founding director of CCA's exhibitions program, the Wattis Institute of Contemporary Art, when the Whitney tempted him away.

Rinder's academic position has meant a lower public profile on the local art scene. "Art Life" at least brings his voice back into the public conversation.