

## BOOKS

# Books Issue: Jerry Saltz: Art is Life

This is not a book review. This is a love letter.

by Sarah Swan

December 12, 2022 5:00 PM



My dearest Jerry,

I love you because you love art. I once saw a man at a funeral service grab the woman sitting next to him and plant the sloppiest, wettest, loudest kiss on her mouth – decorum be damned. Your love for art, for artists, is like that. Unabashed. Flagrant. Death defying. Dripping with saliva.

I love you because your new book, *Art is Life*, feels like a deep dive into the subjective powers of art. A friend of mine can't stand your writing. "It's all about him!" he complains. To which I reply: "That's why I like it!"

“Something seismic hit me,” you write after looking at cave paintings in Niaux, France. You found “a bigger inwardness” while watching Sam Peckinpah’s 1973 revisionist Western, *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*. Looking at Eric Fischl’s 2016 poolside painting, *Late America*, plummeted you “through a trapdoor into a landscape of festering wounds.” Your acknowledgment of the spiritual shifts that happen around art makes me less lonely. There are places in me, too, where great art lives, places that feel permanently changed, damaged even, by the force of their impact. Looking at art has consequences.



Jerry Saltz

Jerry, you’ve always been there for me. For decades now, your criticism has connected me to New York, to that horrible, wonderful, tragicomic place that is the art world. I read your writing in my twenties, as an art student at the University of Manitoba. The campus smelled like manure, owing to the nearby farmlands. Our studios were in a drafty old barn. The most exciting thing that happened was a visit by Carolee Schneemann. (She tried to seduce a student who had made a gargantuan cow from Rice Krispies, but I suspect his real appeal was an uncanny resemblance to Luke Skywalker.) How I loved to escape that world, to run away with you to MoMA and the Whitney. I still love it now, two decades later, living even farther from New York.

And, Jerry, I trust you. You admit your blind spots. In *Art is Life*, you call the art world “a great broken beautiful family of misfits” whose motivations are “buried under loads of external bullshit.” This

solidifies my faith in art *and* my cynical despair.

It was wonderful to revisit many essays in this book, to read them now with the benefit of hindsight, wending my way through recent history: 9/11, Dana Schutz before her 2016 painting of Emmett Till’s corpse *ignited debate*, your musings from a dark, isolated, pandemic-ridden city. Your summation of Modernism allowed me to put that particular inner room of mine in order, to cover the old furniture with dust cloths. You’re right. Modernism is over. Your beautiful elegy for performance artist Chris Burden made me ache. Your single paragraph on Kerry James Marshall punched a hole in my thinking. I had to stop reading to look again at *A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self*. Now, I am haunted too.

But, Jerry, let me be honest, here. You can be obnoxious. You’re the Gordon Ramsay of art criticism – a popularizer, a potty-mouth, a personality. I’ve unfollowed you many times on Instagram. Your obsession with genitalia rivals that of a 14-year-old boy. You can be – to use your own words – needy, goony, grandiose. Your wanton way with hyperbole weakens your claims. How many times, after all, can one be “forever changed” by a painting?

But, gosh, you’re good with language. Who else would call Louise Bourgeois “the last twisted sphinx of surrealist psychology?” As a polite Canadian who lacks the chutzpah to criticize artists in print, I envy your gall. Like when you wrote that Takashi Murakami’s paintings have “the visual oomph of screensavers.” Ha! In 2014, I cheered your scathing take-down of new abstraction. I cheered again reading it here, eight years later.

American art is a rowdy feast. With food fights. People with their arms around each other belting out *Hit Me Baby One More Time*, while drunk-crying. Canadian art, by comparison, is an anemic afternoon tea. We dab at the corners of our mouths with napkins and murmur, "I'm sorry, pardon me."

I suppose that's why I love you, Jerry. You let it all hang out, all your desire, all that indefatigable yearning for the next great work that will break your heart, or at least give you a good concussion. You're an ecstatic, an experience junkie. Do you have a God Bless this Mess sign above your desk? A wonky neon halo flickering above your head? You really should.

With much affection,

Sarah

**Jerry Saltz is the senior art critic at *New York* magazine and its entertainment site, *Vulture*. He won the Pulitzer Prize for criticism in 2018. His latest book, *Art is Life* (Riverhead Books) will appeal to readers who love art and words and have at least a small grasp of art history. Read or listen to an excerpt [here](#).**

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13 December 2022 issue

Jerry Saltz

Riverhead Books



## Sarah Swan

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