

Hilton Als Is a Critic Who Curates, or Is It the Other Way Around?

The Pulitzer-prize winning writer and essayist talks about his love of art and how he reconciles two challenging roles.



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By Will Heinrich

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Hilton Als is best known as a writer. His essay collection “White Girls” was a finalist for a 2014 National Book Critics Circle Award, and he won a Pulitzer Prize in 2017 for his theater criticism at The New Yorker, where he has been a staff writer for more than 30 years. But in the art world he’s equally visible as a curator. He has organized a major show about Joan Didion at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles and curated a traveling series of painting shows at the Yale Center for British Art, as well as two shows of Alice Neel’s portraits at David Zwirner Gallery.

Just at the moment, Victoria Miro gallery in London is reprising the more recent Zwirner show, and the Hill Art Foundation in Chelsea is hosting “The Writing’s on the Wall,” in which Als has assembled work by 32 artists, including Vija Celmins, Ina Archer and Cy Twombly, to investigate how visual art overlaps with writing.

It is unusual for a critic at a major publication to get paid for curating gallery and museum exhibitions, though Als, 64, has cleared his independent hat-switching endeavors with his boss, David Remnick, editor of *The New Yorker*. And Als says he stays clear of reviewing any institution where he has curated a show.

We sat down over lunch in New York’s West Village to talk about whether he still considered writing his signature medium, how he keeps his roles clear, and which great American novelist is still in need of a documentary. These are edited excerpts from our conversation.

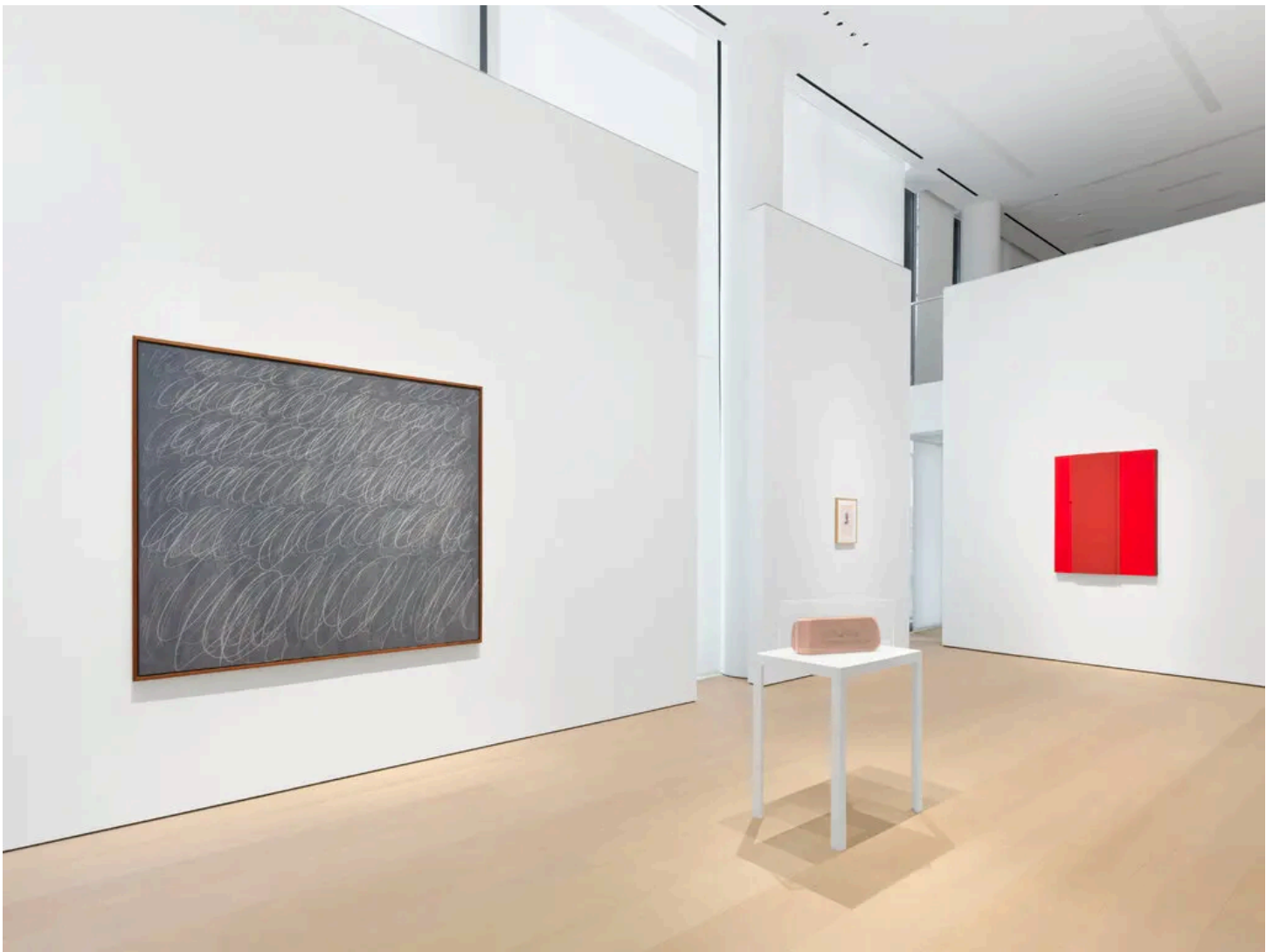
Can you tell me something about your relationship to visual art, where it comes from?

Well, I think that if you grow up without access to, you know, the annual trip to Europe to look at paintings, something else happens. And that something is having a parent who’s very inventive about finding cultural things for free, for kids. So I went to these free figure-drawing classes at the Brooklyn Museum. And I remember liking the role of the artist. I wore a little striped shirt, and I liked enacting being an artist. Which I think was kind of parallel, in a way, to talking about my gayness. And eventually I would walk to the

Brooklyn Public Library, and they had these extraordinary photo books, and I remember finding or discovering Avedon, Penn, and I was fascinated by the worlds that they were capturing. So much so that I wrote a letter to Dick Avedon offering my services. I was 13. If the work was alive to me, and if the person was alive, why wouldn't you contact them?



Hilton Als assembled work by 32 artists, including Ellen Gallagher's grid titled "DeLuxe," for "The Writing's on the Wall: Language and Silence in the Visual Arts," at Hill Art Foundation. via Hill Art Foundation; Photo by Dan Bradica Studio



At the Hill Art Foundation, Als's current show includes works by Cy Twombly (left), Vija Celmins (center) and Jennie C. Jones (right). via Hill Art Foundation; Photo by Dan Bradica Studio

Totally. They're talking to *you*.

And they were really companions to me, in a way. But also my mother had a very strong belief in artists, a love of artists. My sister and I always had a kind of sympathy for artists — and also I had a desire to make things. I knew from the time I was 8 that it would be language based, because my sister was a poet. And you don't need anything for writing — you need a pencil. It was a powerful thing to want to be. It's almost like you know you're willing it.

It sounds to me like you've always been telling a story about being an artist.

All curators are storytellers, they really are storytellers. They're trying to tell some kind of narrative, even if it's about fracture. You're telling a story about a person, or —

Or an idea.

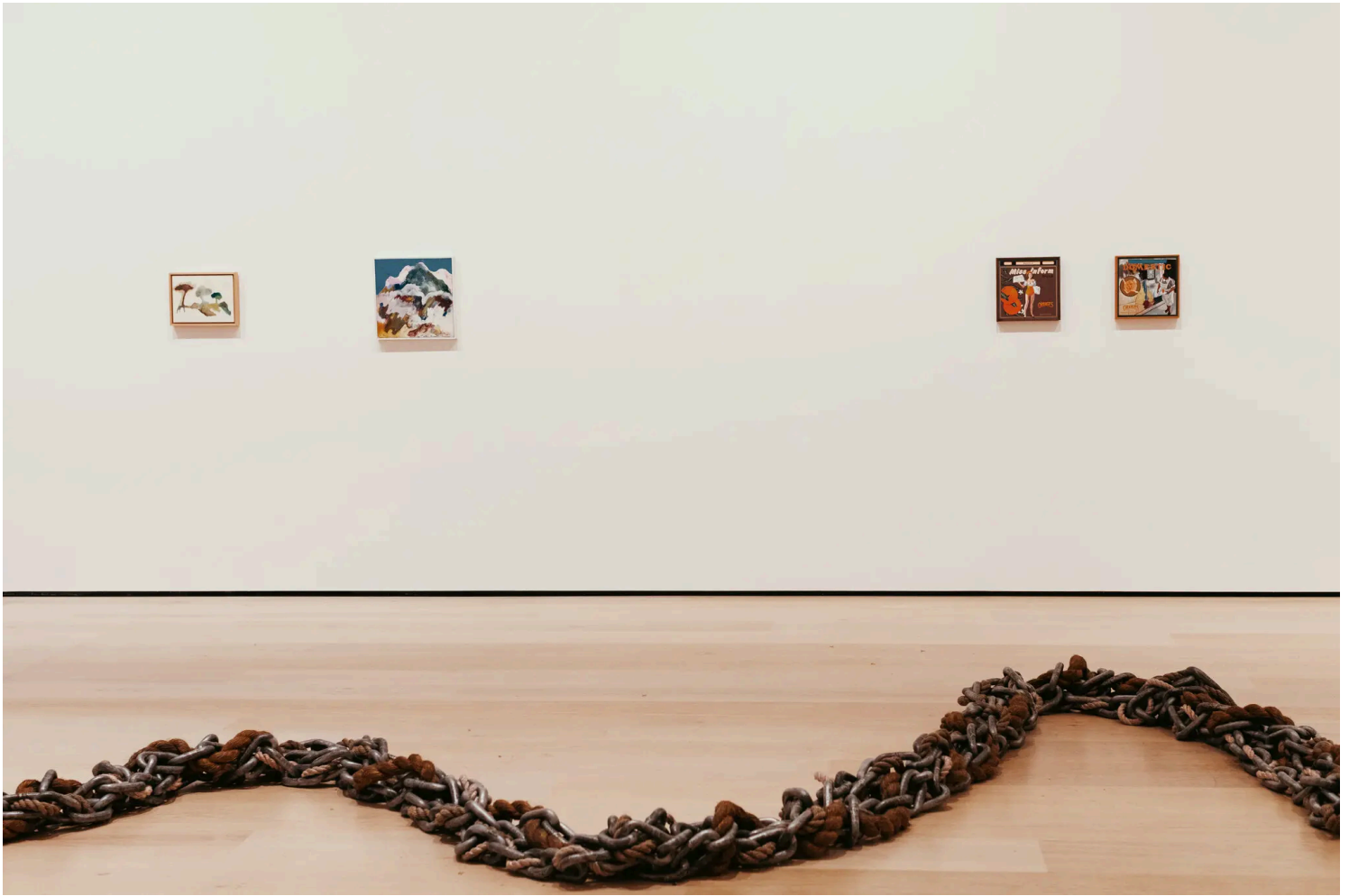
You know what I found recently? The announcement for the first show I ever did at Feature Gallery [with nine artists around a single theme].

When was that?

1989.

So your curating goes all the way back!

Here's the story. Again, I wrote a letter to [Feature's gallerist] Hudson. I said that I was a fan and I wanted to do a show. This is a long time ago when you could say that. And he said, 'Great,' and he gave me the little back room. He had a little gallery on Broome Street. And I asked if I could work with my friend [the photographer] Darryl Turner. It was the practice that I still do, which is to make a kind of artwork out of available material.



At the Hammer Museum, Hilton Als explored Joan Didion through personal artifacts and also artworks that evoke the arid landscape as well as the fluidity of the Sacramento River, images present in her writing. Below, Maren Hassinger's "River," with steel chains and rope. Top, paintings by Suzanne Jackson and Ben Sakoguchi.
Bethany Mollenkof for The New York Times

You anticipated my next question — when does curation become an art practice in its own right?

I think from the beginning. So then Darryl and I did another show for Simon Watson. He used to have a gallery on Lafayette Street. And then we did one other project, and then Darryl didn't want to continue working collaboratively.

Why did you need Darryl there?

Exactly. You just asked me a very profound question. Because my desire to connect to other humans has often come at the expense of my own survival, sometimes? And — I didn't.

To me there's an obvious continuity in your work as a critic and as a curator. But in terms of your role in the art world, they're two very different types of authority, and I wonder if you've had any problems with those roles being in conflict.

Oh, no, well, I was very honest with David Remnick that there was no way for me to be a chief critic anywhere, because I did this other work. But I can do occasional pieces, and they're exclusively about artists I've never worked with. I think the only kind of crossover might have been an Alice Neel painting in the show I curated at Karma Gallery [in 2021], but that was it. I want to protect the magazine in a way, too. Back to authority — to protect the magazine's authority and not kind of get it blurred.

So when the Hill Foundation says, "Do you want to come do something," you say, "Yes, let's talk about it, but also understand that I'll never write about another show here."

That's exactly how it works.

I recently encountered the artist Pippa Garner's memorable remark about her life, "I tried to set an example that no one else can follow," and it made me think of you. How do you think it would affect the state of art criticism if more people moved between writing and curating the way you have?

Oh, I'm nothing new. There's a long history of writers curating, Frank O'Hara being the obvious example [at the Museum of Modern Art]. I think the more the merrier. But for sure they'd have to be people who can work on both cylinders — and not confuse either. I can't really speak for other writers and curators and I wouldn't want to. But for me, part of the joy of being alive is trying to make all the parts of the self cohere, rules or no rules.



“For me, part of the joy of being alive is trying to make all the parts of the self cohere, rules or no rules,” Hilton Als said. Aaron Wojack for The New York Times

In “The Writing’s on the Wall,” you managed to get in some of the charge of writing without letting the writing overwhelm the visual.

That’s a really great point. I wanted to find work that really balanced. And there are other pieces that are bridges to language — I’m thinking of the Steve Wolfe/Christian Marclay collaboration [“La Voix Humaine,” 1991] of a stereo. Language is on the record in the form of writing on the label, and the silence of the record, which isn’t playing, is a bridge to Ellen Gallagher’s very text-heavy grid of prints [“DeLuxe”].

The real challenge, and the joy, was to find connections and bridges. Once you have the kind of — what would they say in a movie? A master shot — you have to find the details that connect the smaller scenes to the bigger scenes. And I felt that I wanted to be very careful that the connections didn’t overwhelm the bigger pictures, but helped the bigger pictures to be there.

What would you say the bigger pictures were?

Well, just literally bigger pictures. The little Claes Oldenburg drawing is a great bridge to Jennie C. Jones [“Fluid Red Tone (in the break),” a painting from 2022]. I always loved Oldenburg — his renderings and drawings were so beautiful to me — and I remembered Vija Celmins’s “Pink Pearl Eraser,” that there was a kind of pink in it. So things had to resonate rhythmically and also curatorially.

Did you start with a concept or by looking at the Hill Art Foundation collection of J. Tomilson Hill and Janine Hill?

When Mr. Hill sent me a checklist, the things that really stood out to me were all these works that seemed to have writing in them. I don't think that other curators had made that connection before.

Something that distinguishes writing from curating is that you can write something without showing it to anyone. Do you think there's kind of a lower bar of entry to thinking of yourself as a writer?

Well, you have more control, right? You have more control over that particular narrative. But the thing I like about this aspect of creating, it's like making a film. You have the producer who's nervous. You have the artists who are vulnerable. And you have the director/writer, who's me, saying, "Trust me, I'm going to make a narrative that honors all of these elements. And make money, too."

Would you make films, also?

I would, sure.

If I'm a Hollywood producer, and I say —

If you were a producer and you said, "Here's two million dollars and I'm going to not bother you, I love your script" — that would be amazing.

You know what I really want to do? I think there needs to be a documentary about William Faulkner. I can feel people like Ken Burns, they sidestep him, because it's so volatile. Faulkner's views

on race were antiquated, but he had real insights into how sex and race converged in the white Southern imagination. For someone like me to make the film would be extraordinary. Because I'm not supposed to.

Will Heinrich writes about new developments in contemporary art, and has previously been a critic for *The New Yorker* and *The New York Observer*. More about Will Heinrich