

## Anna Plesset Reconsidered

by Pac Pobric | 13 February 2013 | On-Verge

It has come to my attention through more than one channel that my recent review of Anna Plesset's exhibition at Untitled Gallery contained more than one factual error having to do with the artist's materials. The pieces I identified as photocopies were in fact pencil drawings; the wood sculptures contained no actual books, but rather painted facsimiles; and the "painted white canvas" was in fact not canvas but drywall.

On these accounts, I owe Plesset an apology. No doubt it is good to be exact when it comes to identifying media. But the entire episode raises certain questions having to do with the nature of rigorous criticism, and what it means to write lucidly about a work of art. Most essentially, the problem being provoked is what exactly good criticism is meant to pay attention to.

There is no single answer, of course. The best works of art require the invention of new critical approaches, and even the worst have their own individual characteristics. Codified perspectives to novel works of art will almost necessarily fail to yield new insights on account of their not adapting to the work. At times, it helps to pull in something from outside of an individual experience in order to make sense of it. But when it comes to art criticism, what's most important, of course, is the effect of an individual object.

With Plesset in particular, it's entirely safe to say that the misidentified works were meant to fool the eye. Trompe l'oeil's goal is to make you believe that something is present which is not in fact. In that regard, calling her drawings "photocopies," or her painted books "actual books" is to take the work on its own terms, even if, objectively speaking, the terminology is not precise. Criticism is about making sense of the effect a work of art has, which is exactly why Plesset's naturalistic drawing or painting doesn't require the caveat that it is not, in fact, real, any more than a Leonardo painting does. It attempts and succeeds to look precisely as it does.

(As an aside, the last sixty years of art making have essentially been devoted to doing away with medium specificity. Conceptual art, which Plesset's work clearly comes out of, was at the forefront of this charge. No doubt her art is not tied exclusively to that historical movement, but it seems to me that going on and on about the specifics of her materials would be to misunderstand the nature of her practice. In our moment, it no longer seems safe to say that works of art can fail on account of their not being medium specific. Plesset's exhibition lacks strength not because it *isn't painting*, but for entirely different reasons.)

There is no shortage of insipid criticism, especially in relation to contemporary art. Much of it reaches so far beyond an individual experience that it loses complete sight of what it's writing about. It is eager to avoid polemics in fear of being wrong.

But overly cautious criticism fails because it doesn't take into account that criticism is a means of thinking aloud, which is to say that it is always open to amendment based on subsequent experience.

Yet despite my errors of fact, my final conclusions about Plesset's art still stand. If my review fails to take into account the material objectivity of her work—and it clearly does—that's because it is interested in different questions. It rarely matters to me how a work of art is made, nor am I interested in telling artists that certain approaches are doomed for failure. Plesset's tactics are not at fault, only their results. Good works of art demand new ways of thinking through the feeling they instill. Criticism's job is to recognize that.

<http://www.on-verge.org/essays/on-art-criticism-anna-plesset-reconsidered/>