

The Many Friends of Jerry Saltz

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By **Leon Neyfakh**

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Jerry Saltz and Roberta Smith, two of the most powerful art critics in New York, spent Valentine's Day together seeing a few art shows—nothing out of the ordinary for the couple, married 18 years, who visit dozens of museums and galleries every week in service of their respective columns—hers in *The New York Times*, his in *New York* magazine. Among their stops on Sunday afternoon was the Guggenheim, where they spent three hours wandering about before going to the museum's new cafe. Mr. Saltz got some cinnamon-ginger cookies and sat down across from his wife.

Then he made a confession. In a moment of passion and uncontrollable excitement, he said nervously, he had posted a link to her latest article for the Sunday *Times* on his Facebook wall.

“My wife doesn't know I'm posting this,” Mr. Saltz had warned his Facebook friends. “Read this & see if it doesn't do something to your inner-pheromones.”

Ms. Smith's piece, a spirited and uncommonly provocative call for more adventurous museum programming in New York, was already the talk of the art world by then. But when Mr. Saltz told his wife that he'd posted the link, the acutely private, Internet-averse *Times* critic was taken aback. That changed when Mr. Saltz told her about the hundreds of comments and questions that people had posted on his Facebook wall in response. Ms. Smith seemed intrigued. Before long, Mr. Saltz had talked her into logging on to his account the next morning and spending a few hours discussing the piece with his Facebook friends.

Mr. Saltz, whose Facebook picture shows him standing next to Bill Clinton, has a lot of “friends”—4,970, to be exact—and he'd have even more if Facebook didn't impose a limit on how many one user can have. The 58-year-old has been accumulating them steadily since November 2008, when a former student of his registered an account on his behalf, even though Mr. Saltz, a self-described technophobe, didn't really know or care what it was.

In the year or so since, Mr. Saltz's Facebook page has become a phenomenon, having undergone an unlikely, organic transformation that turned it from an inconsequential personal profile into a highly trafficked, widely read discussion board about the art world. Populated by dedicated and predominantly serious-minded artists, curators, gallerists and assorted art-world denizens—many of whom check the page compulsively and post their thoughts multiple times a day—the page has become home to a vibrant community and an essential extension of Mr. Saltz's practice as an art critic.

Mr. Saltz, who considers himself severely socially awkward but nevertheless appears very comfortable at the center of attention, said his activity on Facebook is in part a reaction to the “ungodly” amounts of time he spends alone, writing, in his home office. He said he checks the Facebook page several times a day, including in the morning after he has skimmed the art blogs, gotten his fill of politics and Googled himself to see if anyone has written anything about him since the day before.

“I find it a pleasure and a thrill,” he said. “It's exciting to be in this room with 5,000 people. It's like the Cedar Bar for me, or Max's Kansas City, neither of which I was ever in and probably wasn't cool enough to be in. Now I get to kind of be one of the barmaids in this place, to put an idea in the air and see what happens.”

Mr. Saltz, who has been the art critic for *New York* since 2007, serves as both moderator and participant on the page, frequently posing questions to the group that set off conversations that last for days while also making sure—by threat of de-friending—that no one gets too mean. In recent months, Mr. Saltz has polled his followers for their favorite art magazines, asked them which artists they thought should have been included in the New Museum's “Younger Than Jesus” show and wondered aloud if any of the artists reading had ever posed naked in service of their work. His ost popular prompts garner more than a hundred responses within a few hours of being posted.

Occasionally, he posts urgently worded diatribes—unpolished, unrestrained and riddled with typos—that many readers find surprising coming from a professional art critic.

“You read MOST art magazines and you have NO IDEA what the critic thinks about the work that he/she is writing about,” Mr. Saltz wrote recently as part of a typically heated discussion about the state of art criticism. “Or maybe there's one weenie adjective buried in the second to last graf. Like ‘this work is problematic.’ WTF does ‘problematic’ even mean!!”

In another thread, one concerning conflict of interest in the art world, he

addressed “smug scolds bloviating & tut-tutting about ‘purity’ & ‘conflict of interest’”—code for certain prominent art bloggers, such as Tyler Green of Modern Art Notes—and demanded they “reign in [their] inner-Savonarolas, curb the witch-hunts.”

Thanks in part to such extraordinary ejaculations, Mr. Saltz necessarily stands apart from everyone else in his “bar,” but nonetheless he seeks to encourage his friends—the vast majority of whom he does not know personally—to treat him like an equal in spite of his status as an influential public figure.

“A lot of people who are corresponding on Jerry’s page feel disenfranchised,” said the *New York Times* art critic Ken Johnson, who posts to the page frequently. “It’s kind of a Jerry fan club, but he’s giving them a voice that they wouldn’t otherwise have.”

In a recent thread, Mr. Saltz asked his readers to suggest living artists who should be getting solo shows in New York museums but aren’t. He then chastised the curators he believes are responsible for neglecting those artists.

“Klaus: You dick! Are you listening,” Mr. Saltz wrote, directly addressing the recently appointed director of P.S.1, Klaus Biesenbach. “You know I love you but you’re sitting on the BEST PHYSICAL SPACE on the East Coast and you’re presiding over a pretty boring program.” In a separate post in the same thread: “For God’s sake! I know some of these ideas are for crap; including my own. But Jesus: A lot of ‘em are better than what a lot of big-wig museums are coming up with. Crap! You dopes!”

Many of Mr. Saltz’s Facebook friends have said on the page that they feel empowered by their participation in the discussions. This comes partly from the fact that those “big-wig dopes” are thought to monitor Mr. Saltz’s Facebook account, even if they don’t often contribute to the conversations.

“I don’t see Jerry saying, ‘Let’s march on the museum!’ But I think he sees that he has a little bit of power right now that he can wield,” said the artist Jane Fine, who has been posting to the page for more than a year. “I feel like it’s a force that has yet to fully express itself.”

One of Mr. Saltz’s primary stated goals for the page—which he views as an experiment—is a desire to demystify the art critic in the eyes of readers and artists. To that end, he has gotten rather personal with his Facebook friends, telling stories about family tragedies, career bumps and his diet. A juice fast he took up back in January so alarmed some of his readers that he gave it up at their urging. “Look; you all scared me SO much about me being on what I

thought was a good Juice Fast that I just ate a banana,” he wrote.
“HmMMMM. Good.”

So far, Mr. Saltz said, he does not regret anything he has posted, except for a few times when he has hurt the feelings of other people in the community. And while he acknowledges that some of his more confrontational posts from the past few months seem to suggest an “unspooling,” he does not believe that they have cut into his ability to do the job of a traditional critic.

“I’d like to think I haven’t jeopardized my credibility,” he said. “If I thought that was happening, I would stop, because it’s much more important to me to be an art critic than a Facebook ... thing. If I started seeing people say, ‘Well, you can’t listen to him on the Whitney Biennial because he called Klaus Biesenbach a four-letter word,’ then I would say no, it’s not worth it to me at all. But right now, it’s a blast.”

lneyfakh@observer.com