

# 'The US election killed social media for me'

Critic, editor and curator Mimi Zeiger sees a future for slow criticism.

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# For

the time being, the Eastside Los Angeles neighbourhood of Silver Lake keeps up appearances of regional normalcy. It hums with independent bookstores, coffee shops and passionate (one-sided) conversations about politics, society, gluten-free recipes and Netflix hangovers. With the impression of a marginally sane cultural world still chugging outside the windows, I join Mimi Zeiger in her Silver Lake flat and study the journals, books and album titles on her shelves. A collage of art and architecture criticism, fiction, jazz and experimentation. 'For me, it's always been about where architecture meets something else – pop culture, music, art,' she says.

A critic, editor, curator, sought-after panellist and, most importantly, a self-described 'instigator', Zeiger relentlessly questions how different platforms of media can be used to translate architecture to a larger public. In 1997, as an architecture student at the Southern California Institute of Architecture, Zeiger founded *Loud Paper*, an architecture 'zine intended to increase interest in architecture and patch the rifts between serious architecture critique and writing that can actually let its hair down. In her writings and public discussions, Zeiger continues to position herself at the intersection of architecture and, say, *The Great British Bake Off*. Surveying her bookshelf, we discuss a purposefully slow future for criticism in a Twitter-paced troll world, independent architecture press, and why past writings on architecture should be cracked open in case of present emergency.

What was missing in architecture press in 1997? Why did *Loud Paper* need to exist?

MIMI ZEIGER: We're in a golden age of architecture media right now. There are many different platforms you could take a story to today. But in the 1990s, architecture media in the United States was a bit impoverished. There were fancy architecture journals that required academic vetting to get into, like *Architectural Record*, and *Progressive Architecture*, but as students, we didn't care

about those. There wasn't much out there like *Grey Room*, *Clog*, or *Log* [independent cross-disciplinary journals widely available today]. *Loud Paper* was a way of opening the conversation to a network of people reading and working on different culture 'zines and journals. It enlarged our circle, and allowed us to talk about architecture in new, funny and loose ways, alongside music and art.

What makes you think we're now in a golden age of architecture media?

In 2009, I put together an exhibition called 'A Few Zines', that looked at other small, architecture-oriented publications from the 1990s like *Infiltration: Zine* and *City Journal*, alongside contemporary publications, such as Tom Keeley's magazine *Go Sheffo*, Felix Burrichter's *Pin-Up*, and Jimenez Lai's architectural graphic novel *Citizens of No Place*. We started to see a phenomenon coming together: the setting for younger architects to come into small press. Young architects today have all the tools; they can print on demand and it doesn't cost anything. It's also easier to be global now.

The ease with which anyone – particularly young people – can now publish their thoughts about architecture is a source of anxiety for some critics, particularly those born pre-Internet. How do you feel?

Sometimes I panic. 'Oh my God, there are so many millennial writers and they're so fast!' But maybe it's okay to give readers more and allow them to sort through it. That's me at my most hopeful. I'm not always that hopeful.

My real panic is not so much about there being more writers, but about there being fewer editors who know how to edit. Working with a good editor is hard. It slows things down and makes you rework and double-check. But the work gets better. I'm also concerned that we've got a generation of editors who are essentially bloggers – cultivated enough to make curatorial decisions, but lacking the chops to shape an essay or work with a writer. I believe in writing with constraints, in freedom within a system of writing.

Can architecture criticism have a meaningful life on social media?

This [United States] election kind of killed social media for me. I think social media as a tool for collectivity is waning, but for a while, you really could sense the rising voices of groups of architects and architecture critics on Twitter. They were actively talking to each other and creating ongoing discussions, augmenting the mainstream press. My favourite example is from around the time of MOMA's demolition of the American Folk Art Museum [demolished in 2014]. When the

demolition was proposed, all sorts of people weighed in under the hashtag #folkmoma. It brought about an extended awareness: suddenly you heard a collective voice with the agency to express itself. The hierarchies of architecture criticism dissolved for a moment, because it wasn't just Christopher Hawthorne and Michael Kimmelman weighing in on one thing or another, there were historians and other groups of people contributing different perspectives around preservation. These kinds of conversations were really important for a few years. But I think most of us have drifted out of the Twitterverse for various reasons. A lot of that energy has moved on to Instagram and podcasting. You'll find some hardcore architecture critics still sticking it out on Twitter, though; there's still a place for them there.

How well do architecture critics deal with trolls?

I think friends are more complicated than trolls. The longer you're in the mix, the closer you are to the people you're writing about. And online, you're even closer. When you want to publish something, you're concerned about people's feelings. That's a hard thing to navigate, but offers potential for good criticism: stop writing 'this is good' or 'this is bad', and start asking deeper questions about emerging issues. I'm still interested in exploring various online platforms and what they can do, but I really see the future in more long form, 'slow criticism'. It's not just a default slow, it's a very passive aggressive slow. [Laughs.]

What does 'passive aggressive slow' mean?

The role social media played in the election confirmed that punditry as a rapid-fire response without a lot of deep research or reflection is the wrong way to go. The same can be said of rapid-fire architecture criticism. For example, when the David Adjaye-designed National Museum of African American History and Culture [in Washington, DC] opened, suddenly there were 15 articles of varying quality weighing in on it. Well, what happens if we pull off the cycle? What if we don't all respond right away to Patrik Schumacher [outspoken director of Zaha Hadid Architects]? Let's take our time and situate work in a larger context, slow it down.

That's what I mean by passive aggressive: the opposite of bulldozing your way into the BuzzFeed cycle of so-and-so hates something-or-other, bad buildings do this, or 10 Reasons Frank Gehry is the Worst Architect. That's not criticism. The people I've long looked at in criticism are versed in a kind of slowness. Yes, they can respond fast, but always as a reflection of where they are in time and history. This is probably a bigger lesson for how to respond to Trump, as well.

As tempting as it is to talk about Trump, tell me first about the critics you find most inspiring.

Joan Didion is probably the most influential. *The White Album* [a collection of essays focused on California culture] is one of my favourite books of all time. The positioning of the 'I', that the journalist becomes a subject within the work, and the way she can do a full investigation of herself within the subject is so beautiful. My favourite bit is where she's packing to go on a trip and talking about LA in the late 1960s and early 1970s, after the Sharon Tate murder and during the Manson trials. As Didion is packing, she's reflecting on what she needs – a leotard, skirt, hose, a shawl and a bottle of bourbon. It's about dressing to pass between different cultures. I was influenced by the journalist as a transitory figure, an observer who also needs to fit into different worlds.

Another big influence is Dave Hickey's *Air Guitar*, which I read in grad school. Hickey will take pop culture, fine art and music and mash them all up in a freeform, almost Gonzo journalism kind of way. That was liberating for someone who'd come out of an east coast undergrad education. He was the antidote to 1990s critical theory. [Laughs.]

I see Esther McCoy on your bookshelf.

Yep, there's Esther, and her perspective as a leading critic of Los Angeles. She's been my go-to lately. Almost every time I write a story about LA, I look up to see whether Esther McCoy has already commented on the subject – oftentimes,

How can fiction inform writing and thinking about architecture?

For me, I think this question of time comes from reading the first couple of books of Karl Ove Knausgård's *My Struggle*. He's in the period of life when he's starting to reflect. He slows everything down, works through memory, works through place, through the everyday. I think that can be a very big influence in the approach towards a slower architecture criticism.

What other works of fiction influence your approach to architecture criticism?

I've always had a soft spot for Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and his ability to describe the paranoid undercurrent of LA's urban landscape. Recently, Don DeLillo's *Zero K* shaped how I was looking at architectural honesty. In it, he describes a sci-fi, utopian architecture that is anything but forthright in its expression. I've also been enjoying Dana Spiotta and have been trying to get everybody to read her: She writes about Los Angeles, at the edge of personal narrative and technology. I also just finished reading Chris Kraus' *I Love Dick* and loved its experimental form that makes politics and theory all personal. Basically, I love reading books. As for TV, I've gone completely escapist, with everything that's happening.

Okay, we can talk about politics now. Do you see architecture as a political tool?

Architecture has to recognize its own self-

consciousness about that question. Can architecture effect change? I'd like to hope that it does. Architecture and politics are bedfellows. Within architecture, you engage with the city, you engage with money, and I don't care if you're building in Dubai or South LA, the questions of politics apply.

In the wake of all the violence this past summer, particularly with the shooting of African American men by police officers and the retaliatory shootings of police officers, I started reading what several critics had written around 11 September. So, Martin Pawley, Michael Sorkin, Herbert Muschamp, Ada Louise Huxtable: everybody had written around 9/11.

Very different writers.

Well, the breadth of approaches was useful to see. Some folks were going extremely historical,

## On Mimi's bookshelves

Joan Didion, *The White Album*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1979

Dave Hickey, *Air Guitar: Essays on Art and Democracy*, The Foundation for Advanced Critical Studies, Los Angeles, 1997

Esther McCoy, *Piecing Together Los Angeles: An Esther McCoy Reader*, East of Borneo Books, Los Angeles, 2012

Reyner Banham and Mary Banham, *A Critic Writes: Selected Essays by Reyner Banham*, University of California Press, Berkeley / Los Angeles, 1999

Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*, J. B. Lippincott & Co., Philadelphia, 1966

Don DeLillo, *Zero K*, Scribner, New York, 2016

Chris Kraus, *I Love Dick*, Semiotext(e), Los Angeles, 1997

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she has. *Piecing Together Los Angeles: An Esther McCoy Reader* is a great book, with many strange things in it, such as letters between McCoy and Ray Bradbury. It situates the role of the architecture critic, not necessarily as just being friends with architects or having something to say within a prescribed circle of influences, but as a figure with a certain amount of movement or porosity with other fields.

And then next to Esther on my shelf is *A Critic Writes: Selected Essays by Reyner Banham*, which I see as an evolution of writing, from shorter essays to longer think pieces. Banham's opinions or areas of interest change as he gains more space to manoeuvre. He's the perfect example that being a critic means you can change your mind.

I'm showing you all of these architecture critics, but I use them as research. For pleasure, I read novels. I read a lot of fiction.

others were making big proclamations about the state of architecture. Muschamp ended up writing from a project-based point of view of Ground Zero, and there are some great lines from Huxtable about the hubris of skyscrapers – questioning why Donald Trump was proposing more of them.

Architecture criticism addresses questions of where meaning comes from – it's not simply about critiquing a design or a detail, it situates architecture in a larger context of the discipline, the city, our culture at large. The history of architecture critics wrestling with crisis is particularly valuable today. It can help us wrestle the crises we face now. —