

Athenaeum Review Present at the Creation

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“**W**e need a review!” Rick was vigorously and incisively making this case, as I sat in his living room in the spring of 2017. At this point, the Edith O’Donnell Institute of Art History had been in existence for a couple of years already, and Rick was continuing to think strategically about how to continue to grow and cultivate the institute’s reputation and public presence.

Conversations with other colleagues had helped to confirm Rick’s view that publishing an in-house journal would be a useful complement to the institute’s other activities, especially helping to contribute to its profile outside Dallas. Certainly, established art history institutes (e.g., the Clark, the Getty, or CASVA) maintained significant publication programs, and similarly, publishing would be one important sign of the new institute’s seriousness.

However, the word that Rick habitually used to define his envisioned publication—“the review”—was also a sign of what he envisioned doing differently than business as usual. I had heard him voice a fundamental (and widespread) criticism of academic publishing: that the canonical peer-reviewed journal article—the coin of the realm in academia—was, all too often, slow to appear, expensive to produce, and worst of all, dry, boring, and completely inaccessible to everyone outside a tiny circle of fellow specialists.

Rather, Rick believed that academics had a profound responsibility to share their knowledge and understanding with the general public—which

was why he set aside significant hours of valuable time to give public lectures, and to write for the *Dallas Morning News*. Therefore, the new publication would be a “review,” like the *New York Review of Books*, that could be picked up and profitably read by anyone, inside or outside of academia, who was curious about art history.

The review would be public-facing, and open-access: free to anyone to read. Thanks to a brilliant visual identity created by Cassini Nazir and taken over by Katrina Saunders, the review would be beautiful in appearance, and convey both seriousness and openness. There would be no jargon, no tedious “inside baseball” quibbles about minor points of scholarship, and no online paywall. In its pages, prominent academics would write about important new books, exhibitions, and performances as they might do as guest stars in the *New York Times Book Review*: crisply, concisely, and engagingly.

Always thinking about the big picture, Rick recognized that the review would be an essential mechanism to help connect the O’Donnell Institute to the broader academic community of UT Dallas (and beyond). Working together, Rick and the equally far-seeing Dennis Kratz, then Dean of the School of Arts and Humanities, created a complicated but workable structure in which the review would be jointly published by the O’Donnell Institute and the School of Arts and Humanities, with significant support from the School’s associated Centers. (Their respective successors in office as of 2019, dean Nils Roemer and director

Michael Thomas, have continued to tirelessly encourage and support the growth of *Athenaeum Review*.)

Rick, flatteringly, saw fit to recruit me to apply for the job of editing this new publication. Why? I was an art historian who had already shown a commitment to writing for the general public (in fact, quite at the expense of those peer-reviewed journal articles), and I happened to be available. When I interviewed for the job in summer 2017, Nils Roemer, director of the Ackerman Center for Holocaust Studies, and Ming Dong Gu, director of the Confucius Institute, were encouragingly supportive of the plan, as they have continued to be since then. Roger Malina, longtime editor of *Leonardo* and head of the ArtSciLab, offered priceless advice on how to manage the relationship between print and digital media, and made possible the creation of the unexpectedly popular *Athenaeum Review* podcast. All of these individuals joined the other directors of research centers in the School of Arts and Humanities to constitute an editorial board for the review.

Rick's constant support helped guide the review along the path from initial concept approval to real, tangible existence. After we settled on a 10 x 7.25-inch, perfect-bound format with a glossy cover that could stand alongside such exemplars as the *New Criterion*, Rick saw the value of going the *New Criterion* one better, with full-color illustrations, expertly and efficiently printed by Sherry Perry at Alphagraphics. After I unsuccessfully proposed over 100 possible names for the new review, to no avail, Rick's concept of "the Athenaeum" immediately won over all influential stakeholders, and it immediately became *Athenaeum Review* thereafter.

His own contributions to the Review (alas, too few) were cannily well-chosen, as well as being both deeply insightful and fluently readable (how many authors can really cover all those bases at once?) In his three articles (on the idea of the Athenaeum, the Wilcox Space, and the JFK and 9/11 Memorials, respectively), Rick helped to

elaborate his broader vision for art history, to which this catalogue attests, and to which the O'Donnells lent their magnanimous support: a public, vital, and active field, which everyone can benefit from and enjoy.* He also persuaded a few of his visiting distinguished friends, including the likes of Suzanne Blier, Abigail Solomon-Godeau, Yve-Alain Bois, Thomas Gaehtgens, and Jorge Lozoya—that is, an absolute A-team of world-class art historians—to patiently sit down and be interviewed by me for our fledgling podcast.

I think Rick was, justifiably of course, as proud as anyone when the review began to cultivate an audience among both the UT Dallas community and the public at large. With only small amounts of nudging, we obtained contributions from both intramural and extramural authors. Our first two (modestly) viral articles, by Allan Guelzo on Robert E. Lee, and Gary Saul Morson on "the problem with happiness psychology," were widely shared online and attracted much comment.

Of course, I wish Rick were here to help the review face the challenges encountered by any such new enterprise. Although a lean operation as magazines go, the review still represents a substantial commitment of resources to a single, new project. The print journal appeared amidst the ongoing economic crisis of print media in general—is it still worth producing print issues, however beautiful and substantial, as everything moves online? And the review's very nature as a public-facing, general-interest periodical means that it is not easily justified by the narrowly utilitarian calculus of tenure and promotion. But Rick's example continues to encourage all of us to keep it going. Calling it "the Brettell review" would of course not do justice to the efforts of the many people (only a few of whom are mentioned here) who brought it into existence. But without Rick's vision, competence, and ability to bring new things into existence through sheer willpower and creative brilliance, the review certainly would not exist—just one more good thing that he added to the world, and left for the rest of us to enjoy.

* They can all be read online, at athenaeumreview.org/contributor/richard-r-brettell.