On staying obsessed



Art critic David Rimanelli discusses his cult Instagram account, the poetry of life, and a career that began with a failed hook-up at a notorious gay bar.

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As told to Taylor Lewandowski, 3694 words.

Tags: Writing, Family, Beginnings, Education, Identity.

What did you read as a teenager?

I read Thomas Mann very early. It was eighth grade. I was very attached to my mother's bookshelf. And everyone said, "You're reading *The Magic Mountain*? You're only 13!" I was like, "I know. Aren't I so precocious? I hear that all the time." I hated hearing that. It's annoying. Is that a cut in some way? It is, actually. Thomas Mann was a big deal. It was so grand, European, synoptic. The pinnacle and end of Western Civilization before anyone had put it in quotation marks. *We know everything, but it's all dying before us.* I didn't have many friends at school. I really had none. I was a very isolated person. I was so spoiled. I could have anything I wanted as a consolation prize to being the lonely, miserable only child. The cliché. I started reading Sigmund Freud in high school. Karl Marx. Nietzsche. Faulkner. I liked literature heavy in symbolism and allegory.

Where did you grow up?

I'm from New Haven. I lived my whole life on Metro North, a commuter rail between New Haven and Grand Central. Grand Central is like this symbolic place for me. I guess it is for everyone who lives in New York. I went to Yale. I wasn't very adventurous. I wanted to move out of my house, but I didn't want to move too far from my family. I was scared. That was probably a mistake, but whatever. After that I lived in New York, except for a year in Los Angeles, for the rest of my life.

When did you move to New York?

A long time ago. 1986.

It was the logical next step.

Yeah. It's what you did.

What did your parents do?

My father was a writer. He was an academic. He was a novelist in Italy. He was a communist. I love telling people that: "My father was a communist." Most people in the intelligentsia in the post-war period were communists. He met my mother—it's so inappropriate now—when he was a teacher at Sarah Lawrence. Italian class. He moved to the states in the early 60s and they hit it off. Her dissertation was on Edmund Spenser. She really hated Spenser. I think he's great. I grew up with my grandparents, because my mother and father were detached. It was very much the 60s, 70s. I want to say it's *The Ice Storm*, but it wasn't that glamorous. It's in the geography of *The Ice*

Storm. They were very educated—kind of cool. I'm much less educated. My grandparents were like, "Poor child. Give him a Saks charge card." It's the other side of my life. I had two wardrobes growing up: one for school that was like L.L. Bean, preppy, and the other, which I'd be mocked at school for wearing, like Versace pants. Everyone was like, "How old are you? 14? Weird!" It was as influential as Thomas Mann. I was a fashionable teenager with no friends in New Haven. Maybe if you lived in Santa Barbara it'd be normal.

What did you study at Yale?

I just graduated with an English major—which, even then, was a lame major opposed to a preposterous one now. But art history was the lamest. It was like, "Oh my god, you just want to go to New York and go to parties." This isn't necessarily true, because it is a serious discipline, but there were always girls and a couple of fags. I guess that's not appropriate. Two young gay men. I majored in English, because I thought I knew English well. I was interested in poetry, but that's also when I started to do arty things separate from school.

What do you mean?

Going to New York and trying to meet interesting people. But I didn't really meet anyone interesting until I moved there. I was going to galleries—not just like Castelli, Sonnabend, and Mary Boone, but more the East Village galleries, like the smart ones. International With Monument, Cash/Newhouse, Nature Morte. "Pictures"-type galleries. How did I know about those things? From reading *Details* magazine and *East Village Eye*. Well, they'd list addresses. I'm sure the New York review section of *Artforum* gave me many hints, and also BOMB, *Between C & D*, et al. *The Village Voice*, definitely—those were its great days. I always asked myself, "What were the cool things going on in New York City?" As opposed to what's going on in Midtown. New York was an important destination all my life, but earlier, Midtown dominated.

Even though both of your parents were in academia, you didn't see yourself in that milieu?

I told my mother I'd like to go to graduate school and she was like, "Why? And do this?" [while] gesticulating to her typewriter. She was very negative… I remember Robert Rosenblum said, "You'd never become an academic. You don't have it in you." I want to know why. I don't know. I guess I'm not that kind of person. Indeed, at the time, Robert's opinion annoyed me, but now I see how very true it was.

You were seeking something outside your parent's life.

It was related to learning and reading about deconstruction. You know, Derrida. J. Hillis Miller was like, the evil was emanating from New Haven. I'm sure that's what Hilton Kramer saw. I was ambitious, culturally. It was a geeky but powerful way to socialize. The desire to be with cool people and maybe they'd like me, you know? I don't know if it was separate from meeting guys.

You spent a lot of time alone in high school, and through Yale you found something in art school that then pushed you into…

I made different kinds of friends. I remember I was going to nightclubs or whatever bar everyone considered cool. Now, I think it's so dumb, but when you're 20, 21, that's normal.

This is how you started writing art criticism, right?

The coolest bar, at least I thought, was this bar on Second Avenue and 4th Street called The Bar, which was small, dumpy, poisonously smoky, and weirdly romantic. Gary Indiana went there. Bill Rice. Taylor Mead. He'd always ask me if I'd buy him a drink, which I got tired of doing. He would ask anyone to buy him a drink. It was fine. I didn't really like him very much. I like people who are fabulous or famous, who also paid attention to me. I mean, whatever. You're someone who was in a Warhol movie. Great. You're not Edie Sedgwick. Now I think Taylor Mead is cool; then I thought he was this homely guy. I think Gary Indiana was the biggest influence on my literary life. The first time I went to The Bar I was a very naïve person, not someone with the best judgment.

Sure, I'll go into the bathroom with you, what do you want to do there? I remember someone in the bathroom offering me poppers, and he or I spilled them down. It was *really* bad. Okay. Well, I would've been doing something really sketchy with you, but I have to go to the St. Vincent Emergency Room now, but you're cool-looking I guess. Bye. That was fun. It was embarrassing. It could happen. I'm very butter fingers, but it was a drag.

Now, I've told you a lot, but not really. The first time I went to this bar it was dark and creepy, but the second time I went it was wonderful and I went every night. I was addicted to it. I met a lot of different kinds of people. I started talking to this person I thought was really attractive. Somehow the conversation turned to Peter Halley and his writing and how I thought he was a good writer. It ruined the "date" aspect of it, but he said, "You're so smart, you're so educated. I know the managing editor of *Artforum*. You should definitely write for him." I was like, "Yeah, right." He said, "No, you have to call up this guy Charles Miller." So I did. My art criticism career began with a failed hook-up at a notorious gay bar. Otherwise, I don't know what was happening. I was a paralegal at the time.

Were you doing any writing before that?

No. I mean, back then I still kept a diary. I didn't write anything. I just left school. I did write short stories, now that you mention it. I do remember a couple of them. But not in a motivated way. I wasn't thinking I'd become, like, Ann Beattie or Raymond Carver. I wasn't focused on anything really. I was really confused. I had a lot of interests. And I read a lot, and I don't mind saying I read at a pretty high level—literature, criticism, history, art history. The guy at the bar who changed my life was the artist John Boskovich.

Oh, that wasn't a one-time encounter.

We had a very fractious, complicated relationship for decades until his death. He was my best friend, but we also didn't get along.

Yes, I understand.

I'm sure you do. Very close, but also *fuck you*.

How has your approach changed?

In the art world, people are always being critical—*examine everything*. I'm not sure if I buy it anymore, but back then I did. You can be critical of yourself, but you know it's a joke. You're not chatting with Aristotle. It's very resonant with the 80s, which is funny, because the 80s seems like *who cares*, but that was the first time people were like, "Money, oh my god." Back then I went with institutions, but I couldn't do it very well. I was always kicking someone else or myself and moving to the side—which at the time, wow, you had an appetite for self-destruction, David! Now I don't exist on the side of anything. I'm not there to do anything for art. Back then I wanted to find something or connect; now I'm just in it. This is your life. This is who you are. You're competitive, but you don't know what you're competitive about.

Maybe it's like the incident at the bar, where things are laid out and you're just moving through it. It's not intentional, but you care about art. You know about art. You feel connected to people through art. It's all you know. It's what mitigated the childhood isolation.

I wasn't thinking of it as a career move. It would be a very dumb career move. An art critic is never suggested. Someone might say, "Oh my god you did that? Coming from where you're at? You're an art critic?" It's pure in a funny way. You want to talk to people who know what you're talking about. Yes. How weird. My whole grown-up, personal legend starts at a seedy, nasty gay bar at age 23.

Where do you see yourself in relation to other art critics?

I loved Clement Greenberg. He was right about everything, in a way. It was limited. People always want to knock him. I don't know why. Because he's ugly? I had to review Clement Greenberg, and wrote the review as a letter since he was still alive then. It was a fan letter of sorts, maybe a disabused one, but the motivations and feelings were rooted in love and esteem—not in a barely concealed animus, the desire to do a ripping takedown. No, I loved him. He doesn't seem lovable. I don't align myself with him. Nothing I do makes sense really, except I do take it seriously. Gary Indiana's art writing was very important to me. It was outside of the system taken to the inside.

I imagine you were reading Gary's *Village Voice* pieces as they came out… How would you characterize your relationship with Gary?

I knew the moment I met him, "Oh my god, this is the most brilliant person in my life. I can't think of anyone more astonishing." Maybe if I had met Joan Didion or Renata Adler, people like that. But I didn't. I knew him, and frankly, I like Didion and Adler, but I prefer Gary. His sensibility. And, of course, the legend of Gary. He was always this crazy mad force. I'm so happy Gary has so many fans now, but he was so rough and fabulous. The screaming, the fighting. Dressing you down like you're the lowest. He was so generous to me. He'd take me out to dinner or drinks and always pay for everything. I wish I could replicate that kind of behavior now. It's a nice way to treat others, especially with younger people. Pay for dinner. Buy them drinks. Buy them a book or something. It's cool. Gary was that to a T. *Vile Days* is so impolite in the best way. I have that tendency to be impolite, but not as resolutely and rigorously as Gary was. I was impolite as well, and looking for my next paycheck. It's all very confusing. Of course, in a way, so was Gary. One of the great themes of his writing is the difficulty one faces wanting to be a writer or artist, etc., when one lacked much of or any "private income" as a base. And the perspectival angles or distortions that money creates.

Over the last few years, you've turned your Instagram account into this nonstop miscellany of images and text. I remember Kaitlin Phillips recommending your account, and the late Walter Robinson's. It is an alternative form of dialogue. I'm often surprised by the comments. It reminds me of Dennis Cooper's blog.

Oh, that's good. That's flattering. I like that.

What was the genesis of this account?

A gallerist told me, "You post all these great images with personal stuff. What if you limited it to just art-related material, and say what you're posting in the caption? It'll be better." She was right. It *was* better. It was still dutiful. Now, it doesn't have any duty, it's just what I'm doing that day. It's what I'm thinking about. You get a sense of who I am. It's repetitious. I don't care about variety any more. I write the captions, and they're no longer just specs—artist, title, date, medium—they're a few paragraphs, mini-essays, washes of memoir. I feel corny and silly about it, but it is my life. It's not, "This is what's going on in the galleries this week in New York City." I could do that. Maybe I should. Lots of people do that.

How do you follow contemporary art anymore? It's so atomized. You can follow my preoccupations, conscious or not. People seem to really like it. I'm a cult figure on Instagram! I say that with irony and self-deprecation, but it's kind of true. A lot of people do like my IG account a lot and I'm glad they do. Now I have this weird prosthetic, which maybe I'm too attached to. I'm addicted! But it's not nothing, and being insta-blasé about it is a dreary pretense.

Do you become locked into the same obsession or do the obsessions vary?

They're always the same things. It's what I already know. It's what I'm remembering. In the space of a day it could be Nan Goldin, then Color Field painting, maybe Caroline Blackwood and Lucian Freud, Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Hardwick. Then maybe it's Rene Ricard and we're back in the East Village breakdown. Café society and someone's telling tales out of school. And always kinda nerdy, the once and future pencil sharpener. It's who I am. It charts my continued obsessions over the last fifty years.

Do you use the same sensibility when writing about an art exhibition?

Yes definitely. Certain things do come up. Everything is related.

Could you break down a recent piece of art criticism? Maybe your review of Willem de Kooning at Gagosian?

[Co-chief art critic for *Cultured* magazine] Johanna Fateman is so great. When you meet someone and they can actually talk about art… I'm so jealous of the people I know, so many of them, who knew Bill and Elaine de Kooning. My friend Marsha Pels, in East Hampton in the 70s, ran Willem de Kooning over. She got out of her truck screaming at him, "You crazy fool!," and then he looked up. "It's me, Bill. I'm okay." Génie. Such a great artist, under-recognized, Marsha Pels. She testified against Carl Andre and ran over Willem de Kooning but didn't kill him, and she did run over herself with her own truck. I love what Johanna and John Vincler are doing at *Cultured*. They're both so cool. Magazines have become horrid. *Artforum* has become so repulsive to me. I wasted my whole life on *Artforum*. It's a sore topic. It was important to so many people. I was reading that magazine at 16 fucking years old. Another thing that fucked me over in my life and prevented me from being a rich person. Anyway, I wanted do something for Johanna, because I want to keep writing. I know a lot about art, more than most people.

Exactly. That's why I'm interviewing you!

I remember going to see a show at the Guggenheim: "Willem de Kooning in East Hampton," in 1976 with my mother, and begging her to buy me the catalog. Asking, not begging—of course she bought it for me. The same thing happened that very same year at the Modern; I got the catalog for a Sol LeWitt retrospective, which was likewise tremendously determinative for me. It was one of those decisive moments. I started collecting modern and contemporary art books and catalogs, and going to shows in New York, and reading *Artforum*. I was in high school. It turned me on. It was so exciting. I was in love. I don't know, but I felt crazy. I couldn't help it.

Love is never for anything. It never has a purpose. Real love is folly. I wrote about de Kooning maybe ten years ago, also at Gagosian. Very late work. The dementia paintings. Controversial. I wrote it for *Artforum* and it was one of the best reviews I ever wrote. So I thought I'd go again, but somehow it was such a bad show. It's stupid. It looks shitty. There's no ideas. How did you get so many of these? Are they all for sale? These are major. It was almost a retread, in a way, of the prior piece, which was poetic and emotional and critical, not gush. It's so easy to gush about Abstract Expressionism. You can say whatever you want. It doesn't really mean anything.

So your opinion of de Kooning didn't change, but the curation didn't work?

Yes. But also no. "The time is out of joint." *Hamlet*, really, wow David, just wow! But chronology felt just as I was living in the present and seeing that de Kooning show: ambiguous, fluctuating, treacherous, and revelatory. I kept going back to the show. It was curatorially vacuous. It was done by one of the good people in the art world, Cecilia Alemani. She's not nobody—not at all!—but the show was dumb. Or it wasn't dumb, maybe I was dumb. I saw it four or five times. What began as a big disappointment and what was building up to some sort of takedown of de Kooning as my favorite painter, or of Gagosian—say what you will, a great and historic gallery—changed into something quite different. Something utterly suffused with a kind of romance: the love of art, and my life in art. That show is wedged in my consciousness. The girls at the desk kept waving at me. The gallerinas of 2025. That would be a great book to write: the history of the gallerina.

You're going to write that book?

If I had another lifetime, I would love to.

The History of the Gallerina* by David Rimanelli.**

Well, Sarah Hoover would be the star. She's fabulous. She deserves all of her success, which a lot of people don't understand. They're wrong. I'm right. I mean, so much has changed. You can't be Willem de Kooning coming over from Rotterdam as a teenager with nothing… What was it like to paint when everyone thought you were nothing? Bill lucked out with Elaine. Romantic and delusional. How could she not see him as a drunk lothario asshole? She

probably did, but didn’t care. She loved him. At the end, she took care of him.

Anyway, I believe in art history, criticism, and having philosophical values. It’s really all about poetry, and not just the poetry of writing—of course that’s what stays, but it’s about the poetry of life. It connects to Chris Marker’s films, which I love and adore, and people like Gary Indiana or Lord Byron. I have no problem speaking of Gary Indiana and Lord Byron in the same sentence. I know it’s absurd, but they’d get along.

David Rimanelli recommends:

Chris Marker’s *Sans Soleil*. I’ve seen this film more than any other. More than 100 times.

Everything that Gary Indiana ever wrote, but especially these three: *Horse Crazy*, his first novel, from which the echt-Gary Indiana quote comes: “Affection is the mortal illness of lonely people.” Then *Three Month Fever: The Andrew Cunanan Story*. Like, duh. And then *Rent Boy*: Gary read me this hysterical “picaresque” tale over the phone and as I sat beside him in his sixth floor walk up in the East Village.

D.H. Lawrence’s *Women in Love*. It’s always love love love and it’s a bitter wretched story but it’s love.

Virgil’s *The Aeneid* (John Dryden’s grand style translation). Because never forget grandeur.

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