# On revealing yourself through your work

## Writer and critic Hilton Als discusses processes and strategies for writing, making sure to listen to your own creative voice, and how simply not embarrassing yourself can be the most powerful motivator.

January 15, 2024 - Hilton Als is an American writer and critic. His first book, *The Women*, was published in 1996 and his second book, *White Girls*, was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award in 2014. In 2016, he was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Criticism. In addition to serving as an associate professor of writing at Columbia University's School of the Arts, Als recently curated a show for NYC's David Zwirner gallery featuring paintings and drawings by Alice Neel, all of which were made during the five decades she spent living in Upper Manhattan. In addition to curating the show, Als has written a book about Neel, *Alice Neel, Uptown*, which will be published later this year.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 1977 words.

Tags: Writing, Inspiration, Independence.

**You've spent a big part of 2017 thinking and writing about the work of Alice Neel, as well as curating a show of her work. How did it happen?**

It happened because I had always thought about her and loved her. And I had just an idea. I went up to David Zwirner six years ago and said, "It would be great if you did a show on Alice Neel's people of color." At the time there were various things with the estate that were shifting, so it would finally be possible to do it. It was a thought I'd had many years ago. The thing that was so fascinating to me about her art was that it was so inclusive of so many different kinds of people. A lot of modern day portraitists only paint the inner circle of people that they know. I think the broadness of Alice's vision is really kind of profound. There is an incredible relationship to emotional accuracy or truth that I love in her work.

**Your writing manages to be incisive from a historical perspective, but it's also deeply personal. That seems like a delicate dance for anybody writing about art.**

What I am trying to do for myself, always, is honor the delicacy of complication—the idea that people are not really one thing or the other, that there is this amalgamation of all sorts of nerve endings and truths. One of the reasons that I loved Alice Neel so much was her ability to gather all of this information and turn it around in a certain way; make it not literal, but emotionally metaphorical.

Another thing I love so much about Alice (and try to do in my own work) is that she honors the copyrights people have on their lives. They are the author of their own lives. Your job is to not rewrite it, but to make it really important in some way, to *show* it. To understand that the fictions that are put forth are there to protect themselves, generally, or to give us an idea of something other than the self. Wasn't it Blanche DuBois who said "I know I don't tell the truth, but what *ought* to be truth." That's kind of a great thing for people to know about themselves, that the truth is not an empirical thing; just as the "I" is not an empirical thing. I think that's what I love investigating the most—how we put ourselves together.

**In your new book about Alice Neel you write:**

**"Neel believed the world existed on its own terms, and it was our duty—as citizens, as artists—to know as much about it as possible, in order to better live in it and navigate it; to exist among all the broken glass and bottle caps and boys on the street, in a kind of unsentimental wonder."**

**It feels like as much a statement about your own work as it does about hers.**

It's such an incredible opportunity to be an artist. Our job is to empathize with other people, to understand their story, but also to reveal ourselves. We have this luxury—this is our job. It's a luxury to have the time to investigate our own consciousness to understand it better. That's kind of like a million dollars right there. So if we have this luxury, why wouldn't we exploit it? It's our job, really. That's what I feel.

**For you, is writing—whether it be essays or criticism—a way of figuring out the world?**

Oh, for sure. I mean, I don't really understand what I've said until I've written it. I don't know what I think about something until I've written it down, or found another piece of writing that can articulate it. So I feel, again, that we're in this extremely privileged position of our work being that very thing which is not knowing. Our work as artists is exploring.

**In addition to doing different kinds of writing, you also teach. Does teaching serve as a form of investigation?**

I think so. Right now I'm teaching one class, it's called "Black Male," and it's all about the black male figure. I had worked on "Black Male" with Thelma Golden at The Whitney a long time ago, and I always wanted to explore it from a literary vantage point. The class involves the writing students at the Columbia graduate school. We're reading people like Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison. It's an opportunity to understand that there's not one figure, but many, many different figures. Through writing we come to understand something about America, and how the black male figure became seen as this or that. I felt very passionate about having students from other disciplines in the class as well, so there's a painter, a photographer. It's very important for me to have a kind of cultural diversity in the class because I find that, also, the visual people often tend to actually read more or have a different perspective on reading. All the perspectives are important.

**How do you orchestrate your writing life? And how do you balance your own personal work with your professional work?**

I was just telling someone that great George Balanchine story about when someone asked him what inspired him and he said, "The union, dear. I have to be finished by six o'clock." I always have a deadline that I have to honor in some way, and that helps me. It not only grounds me, but it also frees the imagination in a certain way because you *have* to be creative in a certain limited amount of time. I think for longer writing projects I'm very disciplined because… well, they just take a long time. You have to be, otherwise you don't get it done. Writing just takes a long time compared to curatorial work, which involves other people and ideas. In my work, I love how one thing feeds off the other. It's really just kind of one thing having to do with communication and community.

Also, in regards to writing, you have to support yourself and you want to do it the best way… you don't want to be embarrassed. I think of that great Joan Didion line, something like, "Writing involves the mortal humiliation of seeing one's own words in print." That's one thing that kind of saves us. We don't want to look ridiculous to ourselves, let alone other people. Even though we usually earn a lot less money than most people, as writers we also have diversity of mind; that our minds and our work can explore different avenues is such an amazing thing, too. I'm feeling more fortunate about writing than I used to be because I can see how people get messed up in the corporate world. Thinking about Alice Neel was so helpful to me in that way. She worked for many, many decades in obscurity. It was just about the work for her, and I respect that. That is something to aspire to. Do your work.

**Has your way of working, or your approach to when you have to sit down and write something, changed much over the years?**

I think it has. I think I'm much more serious about it now, about writing in general. I feel more honored by it and cowed by it. And as I said, it just takes such a long time that you can't be half-assed about it. I think I wasn't really serious about it until the end of my 20s. I think perhaps I spent too much time alone doing it, but that was the only way that I knew how to do it or become better at it.

**Your approach to writing criticism is direct. How do you approach talking about someone else's art—answering the questions: *Was this good? Was this successful*?—in a way that feels helpful and that doesn't denigrate the work in some way?**

I feel like it's a communication with another person. When I criticized someone's work, I didn't feel that it was denigrating them. I felt I was trying to talk to them and communicate with them. So I always felt it was more of a conversation than criticism. I just felt like I was talking with someone that I, on some level, wanted to respond to. That the work, either for good or ill, demanded a kind of response. That's what I've always felt.

**Does writing criticism feel different from, say, writing an essay about your own life?**

Yes. You are limited by facts when you're writing criticism, and you're limited by product. I think that when the product is your own mind, you can just dream. And sometimes that is harder.

**Your essays frequently defy traditional genre. You play around with the notions of what an essay can be, what criticism can be, or how we are supposed to think and write about our own lives.**

You don't have to do it any one way. You can just invent a way. Also, who's to tell you how to write anything? It's like that wonderful thing Virginia Woolf said. She was just writing one day and she said, "I can write anything." And you really can. It's such a remarkable thing to remind yourself of. If you're listening to any other voice than your own, then you're doing it wrong. And don't.

The way that I write is because of the way my brain works. I couldn't fit it into fiction; I couldn't fit it into non-fiction. I just had to kind of mix up the genres because of who I was. I myself was a mixture of things, too. Right? I just never had those partitions in my brain, and I think I would've been a much more fiscally successful person if could do it that way. But I don't know how to do it any other way, so I'm not a fiscally successful person. [*laughs*]

**I was struck by this quote:**

**"I believe that one reason I began writing essays—a form without a form, until you make it—was this: you didn't have to borrow from an emotionally and visually upsetting past, as one did in fiction, apparently, to write your story. In an essay, your story could include your actual story and even more stories; you could collapse time and chronology and introduce other voices. In short, the essay is not about the empirical "I" but about the collective—all the voices that made your "I."**

**Do people ever ask you about writing a novel?**

No. I could try, but It feels like a very big, weird monolith to talk about your consciousness as an "I" without being interrupted by other things. That's what I don't understand. That it's just "I" and the world as I see it, when there are a zillion other things coming in. Fictional things that I've written I've not been satisfied with because I didn't put in the real life stuff, too. So maybe I should just go back and do that. But I don't think that one exists without the other for me. Fictional worlds are interesting, but real life is impossible to ignore.

**Recommended by Hilton Als:**

Looking at a special friend's articulate big toe in repose.

Lily Tomlin and Jane Wagner: artists of the first order who have done much to change the lives of other artists using humor and compassion.

Jane Bowles' writing. The weirdness of her syntax and point of view.

Sheryl Sutton's voice on the original recording of Philip Glass' and Robert Wilson's *Einstein on the Beach*. Acting taken to a new level—the real.

My mother

Name
Hilton Als

Vocation
Writer

Fact

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Courtesy David Zwirner, New York