

Adrian Searle on John Berger: 'Art for him was never apart from being alive'

The Guardian art critic remembers his friend as a storyteller and natural performer whose ideas on art were always useful

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Adrian Searle

I cannot overestimate John Berger's importance to me. It wasn't so much his critical opinions or insights I valued, so much as the man himself, whose vitality and receptiveness to the things about him had a force I have rarely encountered.

It was his freedom as a writer I admired most. He had both backbone and playfulness, approaching things at tangents but always illuminating his subjects in unexpected and often disconcerting ways. In his groundbreaking 1972 television series, *Ways of Seeing*, Berger described the purposes of art, and artists' intentions, in ways that felt flexible, undogmatic and grounded both in experience and in delight. He helped us look for ourselves, which is the best a critic can do.

Berger provoked intense loyalties and animosities. There were those who saw his defence of vernacular art as waging war against modernism, a man fighting a rear-guard action against all kinds of artistic progress. This was oversimplistic, as his writing shows. I got to know Berger largely through our mutual friendship with the late Spanish artist Juan Muñoz. In the mid 1990s Muñoz and Berger collaborated on a radio play, which won a big prize in Germany and in 2005 was turned into a stage production at the Casa Encendida in Madrid. Berger, acting the part of a radio chatshow host, fielded imaginary calls and talked about illusion and presence and Goya's dog, while an elderly Turkish foley artist, seated on the edge of the stage, provided sound effects. Already almost 80, Berger performed under sweltering stage lights in the Madrid summer heat and never lost his cool. Although there were several other actors in the work, it was almost a solo performance. John carried it; he had presence.

I asked Berger if he had ever wanted to be an actor and he admitted that he had been approached by an agent who encouraged him to go on the stage after seeing him perform in the annual Chelsea School of Art student revue.

His stage presence and manner reminded me, disconcertingly, of Frankie Howerd. He was a natural and one of the reasons *Ways of Seeing* was so good was that he never came over as the patrician smart-arse superior critic. He made you feel he was thinking on his feet, right there in front of you. John would screw up his face and affect an expression somewhere between bewilderment and anguish, before launching into an argument that seemed to arrive fully formed. He was enormously compelling. He made me aware that writing itself was performative.

He reminisced about his time sharing a Paris apartment with the young David Sylvester, who never let go of an early falling out. It had something to do with Berger's complaints about Sylvester leaving his "voluminous underpants" draped over a chair in a shared room in the early 1950s. Sylvester, I always thought, was jealous of Berger's abilities as a writer of fiction as well as of art, though his career-long public animosity was also about Berger's left-wing politics and his championing of socially engaged art.

It strikes me that art for Berger was the beginning of a journey of his own, a way of igniting responses and provoking thoughts. He approached art with a kind of innocent curiosity. He had enthusiasms I couldn't share (from Soviet artist Ernst Neizvestny to British painter Maggi Hambling) but was open to work as diverse as Rachel Whiteread's House and Muñoz's enigmatic figurations. There are things I wish he had written on, but never did. If he was wrong about Picasso (whom he called a "vertical invader", slicing through tradition) or just plain weird about Francis Bacon (whose paintings he once compared to Walt Disney animations – though Berger later revised his opinion) it didn't matter. His ideas remained useful, because they always felt part of a bigger, ongoing conversation. It is healthy for a critic to beware of fixed opinions.

Whatever he did, Berger was a teller of stories, and alert to the complexities of all kinds of art-making and wri-

ting. Dip into him anywhere – an essay on Courbet, on drawing hands, or Roman Egypt funerary portraiture – whatever it is, his subject is vivid on the page. His writing is filled with insights. That he trained as a painter gave him a sympathy and understanding of the act of making and its difficulties – rare among critics now.

Intensely observant, Berger had the ability to focus the smallest quotidian detail – a penknife in a boy’s pocket, or a pear grown inside a bottle in a farmer’s orchard, bringing in the cows or sharpening a pencil – in order to tell us something about life and human relations, in an unending chain of acts and expressions. Everything he wrote has humour in it as well as sorrow. His writing never forgets the vagaries of the everyday. He revelled in all this.

Art for him was never something apart from the business of being alive. He was grounded. He struck me as a man who was both supremely astute and perceptive, and a sentimentalist. He could be a wonderfully engaging companion. A 1983 television debate with Susan Sontag – both wrestling with what a story could be – remains electrifying, mostly because they were both struggling with thoughts and ideas rather than trading certainties. Always worth reading, even when one disagrees with him, Berger went his own way, which was the only way to go.