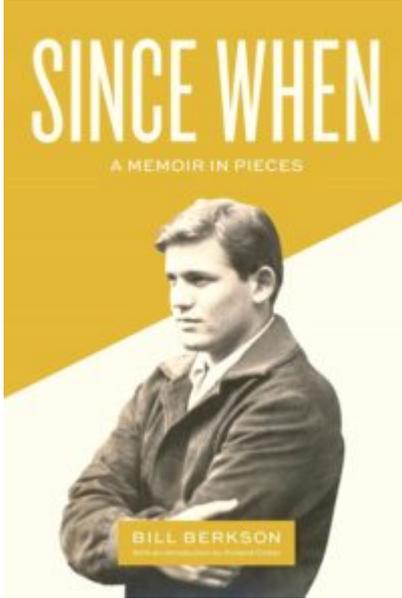


Review: Since When by Bill Berkson

written by Joseph Houlihan | June 3, 2019



Since When by Bill Berkson
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“Dress Trope”

Critics should wear
white jackets like
lab technicians;
curators, zoo
keepers’ caps;
and art historians,
lead aprons
to protect them from
impending
radiant fact.

-Bill Berkson

Bill Berkson was born in 1939. He was a poet and an art critic. His memoir,

Since When, published posthumously last fall at Coffee House Press, captures the wit and generosity of a formidable voice, happiest in the company of friends.

Berkson focuses on anecdotes, first describing his early years growing up in Manhattan in a stylish household, before falling in with the New York School of poets and painters: Frank O' Hara, Kenneth Koch, Larry Rivers and John Ashbery. And eventually settling in Bolinas, California in 1970 to work in San Francisco for the breadth of his long career at the San Francisco Art Institute. Berkson described himself as a poet, critic, and curator, "an art historian without a portfolio."

And it's a considered friendliness, because Berkson resisted the severe. The New York School rose up in response to the seriousness of high modernism. Through the years, he mocked what Kenneth Koch called, "Auden of the baleful influence."

Early in *Since When*, Berkson includes an anecdote about the mainstream poetics of the 1950s: In 1958, he was a student at Brown University in Providence, but he desperately sought to connect with what he identified as the Beat Generation. So on Thanksgiving Break, he traveled to San Francisco and visited "The Place," a North Beach bar, looking for Gregory Corso or Allen Ginsberg, to which the bartender replied, "They're all in New York, man!" and, "The only San Francisco poet I saw plain that night was pointed out to me after the bars closed: Jack Spicer, shoulders hunched, standing alone in the 2 a.m. Fog on the traffic island at Broadway and Columbus."

Later he writes about Auden directly – an enduring, however ambivalent influence. Berkson recalls, "Frank O' Hara told me that once, around 1949, while he and John Ashbery were at Harvard, they were in the Grolier Bookshop together and saw Auden browsing the shelves. Nothing passed between Auden and the then very young poets. After Auden left the shop, John said to Frank, "Wouldn't you think he'd know?"

Since When keeps the stories unraveling, over the course of six decades. And, as a poet and critic, among poets and painters, Berkson adopts the practice that Kenneth Koch also eventually grew into, "mentioning my friends...(because) maybe this will bring them back to me...not them perhaps, but what I felt about them." Berkson was a generation younger than the founding New York School poets, and his most immediate contemporaries were Ron Padgett, Joe Brainard, Ted Berrigan, Anne Waldman, and Jim Carroll. The older poets were quickly enamored with Berkson, owing not only to his extremely developed sense of self, but what they saw as promise.

The memoir shares a brief biography, before settling into various recollections of his friends, as a kind of catalog of poets. Kenneth Koch was especially important for the formation of Berkson's poetic voice. Berkson took a class with Koch at the New School in 1959. They became friends, and Koch's sense of dedication to the life showed the way for Berkson. Berkson often praised Koch's levity, and commitment to a sentimentality that was true, although told in slant. In the memoir, Berkson quotes one of Koch's favorite lines about poetry, "A poem is made by someone other than the

speaker and addressed to someone other than the listener.”

This memoir is the result of years of listening. And it's full of energy. Above all, Berkson has a kind and generous wit, and there is the sense that he is telling personal stories and jokes, that are not self-aggrandizing, or even romantic, but just sweet and funny. The scope of the biography is vivid and cinematic. Parts of it trend incredible: Growing up in the 1950s, Judy Garland and Vicente Minnelli were household friends. He tells a story of bringing ice cream to Greta Garbo at a party, “Oh, you are my ice-cream man!” There are beautiful fragments from his early adulthood in the 1960's: He's in Paris, and he remembers vividly the day Edith Piaf and Jean Cocteau died. And while on occasion, the bohemianism of the era can be a little grating, the sincerity of the anecdotes pull the reader through.

Berkson's poetic practice takes him around the world, and through the decades, eventually settling in Bolinas, cementing the “insidious New-York-Bolinas-Axis” of contemporary poetry. He lives besides Joanne Kyger. And contributes to the formation of the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied poetics, with Anne Waldman, where Kenneth Koch and Allen Ginsberg improvise odes to William Blake and Popeye.

After settling in Bolinas in the late 1960s, Berkson developed a practice that centered on listening, sharing, and teaching. He edited a magazine, *Big Sky*. And contributed reviews each month to *ARTnews* magazine. This broadened his perspective, even if it factored ambiguously into his personal practice. In 1984, he began teaching at the San Francisco Art Institute. He lived happily in the world of visual arts and the world of poetry, writing reviews and curating shows. And from this, Berkson developed a special love for the role of criticism, as an amateur, and essential part of caring cultural environments. He gently derided critics, even as he worked assiduously, churning out a review a month. He quotes Virgil Thompson, who once wrote, “Writing a review is not giving an examination, its taking one.”

Since When sometimes feels like an unfinished memoir, or a memoir in fragments. And in this sense, it captures part of Berkson's ongoing practice. Because nothing is ever really finished.

There are stories that reappear in more than one context throughout the text. There are places where the details run thin, (much of the 1980s and 1990s is left without much chronological remark). But this makes it a fascinating study in process. Seeing the stories and tensions that persisted through Berkson across the years, underscores some of the breadth of his work from fifty years of engagement.

After Berkson's death in 2016, there was a memorial at the Poetry Project. Poets and painters came together to celebrate his life and at the service, Ron Padgett said that Bill Berkson made him, “feel that being part of a civilization was a good thing.” There is something indescribable about good company. It fills you up with optimism and breeds creativity.

Padgett also used the word “Probity,” to describe Berkson. This memoir has that, and more. It's sentimental and funny, and makes you believe in a shared

social project. Berkson was dedicated to this, and the example of his poetry and practice astonishes in this terrific memoir.