

Made You Look

Amy Goldin: Art in a Hairshirt, Art Criticism
1964–1978

Essays by Amy Goldin, Robert Kushner,
and others

Hard Press Editions, 220 pages, \$19.95



Amy Goldin in her boathouse in Neuilly-sur-Seine,
France, 1971.

Amy Goldin was a passionate, prickly, and deeply engaged voice for art publications (including this one) during the years when the formalist esthetics of Clement Greenberg's disciples were on the wane, and before the rise of the sort of multicultural stew her writing anticipated. A serious student of philosophy at the University of Chicago, she worked briefly as a painter in the late 1950s and early '60s. But according to Robert Kushner in his essay here, she "never seemed fully satisfied with her results and . . . quit painting because it was too painful."

Goldin was fearless in skewering some of the cultural heavyweights of her day, such as Harold Rosenberg, champion of Action Painting, and media guru Marshall McLuhan. In the process, she launched such prescient observations as this, written in 1966: "Painting, sculpture and theater melt into each other as the boundaries between the arts sag under the pressure of thrusts toward the stronger effects." She was equally adept at pithy statements that can stop you in your tracks: "German Expressionist painting is marvelous for people who don't like art." And the tartly turned barb: Fernand Léger "is always threatened by bloat and the muscle-bound cloddishness of a hung-over Mr. Clean."

But Goldin was above all a questing intellect and a

staunch advocate for what she saw as overlooked corners of the art world. In 1973, while in her late 40s, she commuted from New York to Harvard to take courses in Islamic art with scholar Oleg Grabar, and soon after she went on an extensive tour of Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan. These endeavors led to eloquent defenses of decoration—ranging from rugs to Matisse cutouts—and to a dense, occasionally frustrating analysis in her essay "Patterns, Grids and Painting."

Art in a Hairshirt is a wonderful introduction to Goldin's career, which was cut short by cancer at 52, but the volume is marred by a shortage of illustrations. (Who, for example, remembers the artist Zuka? A review is included but with no reproductions of her work.) Nonetheless, through Goldin's writings and the interwoven appreciations from artists and fellow critics, a portrait of a lively and astute mind emerges.

—Ann Landi