Lives of the Artists by Calvin Tomkins

Whether writing about Jasper Johns or Jeff Koons, Cindy Sherman or Richard Serra, Calvin Tomkins shows why it is both easier and more difficult to make art today. If art can be anything, where do you begin?

For more than three decades Calvin Tomkins’s incisive profiles in The New Yorker have given readers the most satisfying reports on contemporary art and artists available in any language. In Lives of the Artists ten major artists are captured in Tomkins’s cool and ironic style to record the new directions art is taking during these days of limitless freedom. As formal technique and rigorous training continue to fall away, art has become an approach to living. As the author says, “the lives of contemporary artists are today so integral to what they make that the two cannot be considered in isolation.”

Among the artists profiled are Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst, the reigning heirs of deliberately outrageous art that feeds off the allegedly corrupting influences of capitalist glut and entertainment; Matthew Barney of the pregenital obsessions; Cindy Sherman, who manages multiple transformations as she disappears into her own work; and Julian Schnabel, who has forged a second career as award-winning film director. Tomkins shows that the making of art remains among the most demanding jobs on earth.

My Personal Review:
Its hard to understand a lot of the contemporary art in museums and galleries. You cant just look at it and say I like it, instead you have to learn about the concept behind it. You have to read the owners manual to really get at what the art is about. The hard part is finding explanations about the art that make sense. Much of what is written is pretentious and painful to read. Ive given up trying to read artist statements.
The solution is to find the people who know how to write about art; people like Peter Schjeldahl, David Hickey and Calvin Tomkins. For my birthday this year I was given Calvin Tomkins new book Lives of the Artists and I highly recommend it.

He writes:
Formalist art critics used to say that the life of the artist was irrelevant to an understanding of his or her work. This may be so for certain critics, but ever since 1550, when Giorgio Vasari published the first edition of his Lives of the Most Eminent Architects, Painters, and Sculptors of Italy (the title I shamefully swipe here), biography has informed our understanding of art. In my experience, the lives of contemporary artists are so integral to what they make that the two cannot be considered in isolation.

Each chapter in the book is devoted to a major living artist:

- Damien Hirst
- Cindy Sherman
- Julian Schnabel
- Richard Serra
- James Turrell
- Matthew Barney
- Maurizio Cattelan
- Jasper Johns
- Jeff Koons
- John Currin

To get the flavor of his writing, consider the opening paragraph:
Making art is both harder and easier than it used to be. The radical changes in art and society that were set in motion during the early years of the twentieth century gave rise to a new kind of artist, whose first obligation was to invent or discover a new self. Tradition, skill, rigorous training, formal knowledge: All the old requirements fill away or became optional. Art, it seemed, could be whatever artists decided it was, and there were no restrictions on the new methods and materials - from video to verbal constructs to raw nature and urban detritus - that they could use. The limitless freedom of the modern artist has been an unending burden. If art can be anything, where do you begin?

Calvin Tomkins wrote another book that I liked even better: Duchamp: A Biography. Duchamp is central to the birth of much of what is contemporary art today.