

Petru BEJAN¹

What is art criticism (any longer)?

Abstract: What is the 'place' of art criticism? Can it be attached to the 'sciences' considered to be exact? Or, is it rather, more related to the social sciences and humanities? What exactly particularizes and distinguishes a concern such as the one invoked?² Are the prejudices that assign a peripheral role, ancillary and even parasitic relative to visual arts justified? Are the prejudices that relate it to aesthetics and philosophy? Is art criticism an evasive, duplicitous and, thereby, 'suspicious' activity? Is there an 'ideal' condition of it? What are the competences of the critic? Can he be substituted by someone else? How should be an eminently critical discourse articulated?

Keywords: art criticism, critics of the critics, critical art

In principle, 'critical' is the endeavour in which someone - the critic, in this case - formulates judgements regarding the success or failure of a work, the artistic properties exhibited by it, but also the potential meanings contained. We can recognize numerous critical registers and typologies; we speak of descriptive, informative, celebrative (of protocol), interpretative, evaluative, reflective criticism, of the written and spoken criticism, of the journalistic criticism and the one with academic destination. Such diversity requires complementary skills and abilities: historical-artistic, aesthetic, hermeneutical, semiotic, stylistic and, of course, oratorical.

Endangered by trendiness and protocol, art criticism seems to be perceived today as an infamous, evasive and slippery genre; it evades the firm, predictable patterns, rarely being assumed as professional destiny or definitive vocation. Secondary to the current concerns of the protagonists, plastic criticism is being practiced occasionally, 'among others', depending on the caprices of the different events that condition it. In retrospect, we notice that few are the consecrated authors that did nothing but criticism. Such an occupation is learned 'on the go' or from experience, as long as there are no schools that would teach you how to practice it perfectly, 'by the book', or 'recipes' that would insure it a flawless functioning. Hence, perhaps, the slight cultural 'sub-bidding' compared to the similar applications from other fields. How could be explained the suspicions and precari-

¹ Prof. Dr. Al. I. Cuza University, Iasi, Romania, pbejan@yahoo.com

² Cf. René Berger, *Estetică și comunicare*, Editura Meridiane, București, 1976, pp. 66 sq.

ousness that evidently accompany the critical discourse in almost all public hypostases?

Equally esteemed and detested, the criticism specific to visual arts combines the literary talent and the loquacious performance, the epic abilities of the chronicler with the spontaneous eloquence of the orator. Such qualities are not always at hand, nor equitably distributed in one and the same person. It's not always enough to write good, as neither only to speak beautifully. The critic is asked to give judgement in situations that require both speculative mobilization and skiving or strategic retreat. A real language equilibristic is put in play, meant to reconcile the celebrative tonalities dictated by the moment with the severity of the 'judgements' of taste, the jubilations of the idea with the derisory of the daily fact. Regardless of the context, the untempered eulogistic pathos is just as ridiculous as the oversized evaluative sobrieties. In one and the same intervention the firmness and the prudence, the subtle observation and the cliché, the speculative density and the superficiality are met.

The critics of the critics are usually ruthless, punishing harshly any weakness or hesitation. It is precisely why the space occupied by art criticism is rather one of the inaugural solemnities, of the economic rhetoric and of the complicities that don't destroy, but encourage. Statistically speaking, the share of 'demolishing' criticism is derisory compared to the 'positive' or laudatory one. Isn't it that we find just here a sign of the mentioned precariousness?

Of course, there are more ways of doing criticism. The type familiar both to the public and the artists seems to be the greeting one, folded on the immediate expectations of the authors and, often, of the participants in exhibitions. Present to a significantly reduced extent, the speculative criticism (of ideas), as well as the interpretative one, minimize the references to authors, highlighting instead the problematic, stylistic or of message intake of the works exhibited. If it is convincingly articulated, the critical discourse identifies and discerns significances, proposes analogies, compares the elements, establishes correspondences and filiations, interprets and evaluates the works brought to the attention. As long as he chooses knowingly, the critic establishes hierarchies and legitimizes, offering clues regarding the value of the author of the work. Its authority, taste, flair and erudition, the weight of arguments, the comprehensive availability, and the oratorical and literary talent are his best recommendations.

What exactly is generally reproached to the critic? The complaisance, the dishonesty, the moderation, the lack of aggressiveness. As in other cases, the public would prefer treatments more 'sharp', blunt, similar to the cold and bloody executions from the time of the guillotine. Why is it not given satisfaction? Why doesn't the critic accept the role of the merciless headsman? Can he criticize without accusing, that is, without the 'victims'

being subject to some humiliating public 'deconstructions'? The first role of the critic is the one of exercising an option. He chooses who to write or speak about, knowing *ab initio* that he won't please everyone. Solidarization is built on a vector of the favourable, yet coherently argued discourse. The omissions - premeditated or not - are even more painful. Sometimes it is preferable to be criticized, even harshly, than disregarded.

How do the nowadays critics look like? Raymonde Moulin sketches the following portrait: 'The critics, who express themselves in the major daily newspapers describe, interpret and evaluate the events of the art scene. They have in general an academic formation, of art history or philosophy and practice a primary profession in the secondary or higher education, or in a school with artistic profile'³. Starting from the '80s, Moulin notices, the museum conservators have become the competitors of the critics. More recently, the critic is doubled by the curator - the one responsible for designing, organizing and promoting an event.

Almost everywhere, the great critics stood by the talented artists. People of reflection, they legitimized practices of the most radical types, decisively influencing the receiving of works. The last decades continue the transition started in the '70s, from art criticism to the 'critical art'. This means that the critical discourse tends to be ascribed to art, and the profession of the critic increasingly comes closer to the one of the artist. Such complicity proved to be protean in the USA, where the important critics (Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg, and Joseph Kosuth) were formed right in the artistic environment.

The criticism applied to visual arts has - it's known - a distinct profile. Happening directly, in front of the public and the author, it avoids as much as possible the falsely-judicious severities and bluntness. The discursive diplomacy of the varnishing usually discourages the accusing pathos or the eminently hostile atmosphere, familiar to the public executions. The profile of the critic is different from the one of the police commissioner, invested with the mission of necessarily identifying flaws or crimes, but also from the one of the inflexible prosecutor, requiring *ex officio* punishments. The hermeneutical rule of 'charity' or 'favourable disposition' leads you to admit that in someone's offer you could find something good, worthy to notice and promote. The severities - if any - can and must be expressed; not necessarily abrupt and incriminating, as allusive and ironic. The role of the critic is no longer to judge and punish vulnerabilities, but to discern, evaluate and understand. Depending on these he exercises the *prerogative of option*; he chooses, thus, according to his own tastes, aims and expectations.

The status of art criticism must be sought not in the methodological frameworks of sciences, regardless of their nature, 'positive' or humanistic,

³ Raymonde Moulin, *L'artiste, l'institution et marché*, Flammarion, Paris, 2009, pp. 206-208

What is art criticism (any longer)?

'exact' or speculative. As in philosophy, there is an inherent 'scientificity', of historical and conceptual nature, around which are strengthened the data of the specific competence. The critical approach mobilizes both cognitive and discursive abilities, but is not only limited to these. In such a context, the library is only a starting point. Outside the gallery, the museum or the specialized publications, i.e. excluding the places where it is effectively practiced, the criticism contradicts itself. More than pure theory or applied rhetoric, it is *attitude*, commitment, axiologically and culturally centred action. Perhaps that is why the definitions and explanations satisfy only to a little extent...