

Mediation in the Visual Arts

Abstract: The century that just passed imposed important mutations in the configuration of the visual arts. The modernist avant-gardes – it is known – imposed styles, vocabularies and work techniques radically renewing. Frequently invoked in the philosophical discourse, “the death of art” was in fact announcing the end of a cycle, the end of a “beautiful” story, the twilight of the traditional manner of making and receiving the artistic object. Alongside the classical canons of recognizing the “work of art”, the exigencies of professional criticism were also disturbed. We live in full “post-art” or in the “post-history” of art; we are contemporary to the art of after its “end”, when everything is pulverized, relativized and allowed¹. The often-invoked “agony” of art is also accompanied by an inevitable theoretical deconstruction of criticism. Noting the dead end in which it seemed to get, *Artpress* – a Parisian magazine specialized in promoting contemporary art – aimed, in its January 2011 number, to discuss the possibility of “reinventing” criticism. How is the “mission” of criticism seen today? What of the critic? To reveal the “truth” of a work of art? To discover values? To legitimize certain practices?

Keywords: visual arts, art criticism, critic, curator, commentator, forms of mediation.

Seen in retrospect, art criticism has abundantly proven its cultural utility. It would be enough inventorying, even schematically, the forms it took in time. A Diderot, for instance, preferred “inventive” criticism, Baudelaire – the “methodical” and systematic one, Apollinaire was practicing a criticism “of circumstance”, occasional. The recent classifications barely keep up with the diversity of criteria and approaches. It is spoken of a formalist criticism (in Clement Greenberg’s case), but also of intellectual responses (Harold Rosenberg), referential (descriptive or informative), preferential (emotional), militant, phatic, poetic, interpretative, promotional...².

Although seemingly unproblematic, the concept of “criticism” is usually considered in two major meanings – one philosophical (Kantian), the other one ideological (Marxist). In its first reading, criticism is analysis, evaluation, judgement, discernment, deliberation. In its second meaning, criticism is perceived as a form of “class war”, as a blunt “weapon” through which the

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¹ Arthur C. Danto, *After the end of art: contemporary art and the pale of history*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1997.

² Dominique Chateau, *L’art comptant pour un*, Les presses du réel, Genève, 2009, pp. 65-70.

proletariat undermines from the ground the unjust practices of the ruthless capitalism. Criticism, in this understanding, is associated to challenge, protest and biased commitment. It seems that this latter meaning has taken root in the recent cultural mentality. Nostalgic criticism invokes themes considered out dated and obsolete (beauty, harmony, artistic skill, work of art), while the revolutionary one speaks of contesting, resistance and transgression³. What do we have, in summary? Conservatism and passivism – on one hand; activism and militancy – on the other.

Regarding the critical “accents”, the mutations are visible over time. After the War, the American critics privileged formalism, paying more attention to “surfaces” and less to contents. On the Old Continent, the 70s are marked by the temptation of “rationalizing” criticism, thus the protagonists wanted to give it an “objective” allure⁴. The “old” criticism was relying on verisimilitude and relativism; the new one wanted to be scientific and exact⁵. The critical discourse becomes “academized”, being practiced mainly in intellectualized forms (evaluative and interpretative). The academia, the art historians, the philosophers, the sociologists, the linguists, the semioticians gradually replace literary scholars – who had held until then the monopoly of opinion. The critic takes himself and is taken seriously; he becomes “radical conscience” of his time, preoccupied with the sanitation of the precarious economic and political realities. The ideology of student protest movements imposed itself as well in the tonality of “new criticism”. Its main sources: Marx, W. Benjamin, Adorno, Marcuse, Althusser, Lacan.

The 80s significantly attenuate the critical dimension of art. The critic assumes new responsibilities in art institutions: he is director of gallery and exhibition commissioner (curator), market barometer, negotiator and relay of interests. Criticism puts itself in the service of decision institutions. Moreover, the state absorbs this function, subsidizing the artists who criticize it. Criticism has been neutralized and replaced with the authoritative discourse, with the accomplice presentations. The critic, also, became “the artists” spokesperson, their agent⁶.

The place of the critic fierce *ex officio* (the critic – executioner, judge, police commissioner, and inspector or quality controller) is taken by the critic – partner, friend, even “fan” or admirer of the artist. Having become its accomplice, he forgets to...criticize, to evaluate or to interpret. Post-modern criticism is often limited to promoting and praising. Uniform, univocal and monotonous, the laudatory, eulogistic discourse enshrines the death of any criticism, in favor of an “aesthetics of resignation and acceptance”⁷ – aberrant, stereotypical, and uninteresting...

³ Cf. Jean-Marc Lachaud, *Pour une critique partisane*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 2010.

⁴ Catherine Millet, in *Opus International*, no. 70-71, 1979, p. 60.

⁵ Roland Barthes, *Critique et vérité*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1999, p. 15.

⁶ Rainer Rochlitz, *Subversion et subvention*, Gallimard, Paris, 1994, p. 59.

⁷ Guy Scarpetta, « Le trouble », in *Art Press Spécial*, 1992, p. 133.

The progressive depreciation of the critical discourse in the last decades is no stranger to the mutations that took place inside the “art world”. The transformation of the “work” in consumer good, its perception as “commodity” destined to the market, to the trade, employs much more pragmatic conducts. The exigencies of favorable commercialization surpass, but also attenuate any critical scruples. Neither artists, nor exhibition institutions have the interest of a discourse that would compromise their expectations. Who would voluntarily desire professional suicide or financial failure inviting someone uncomfortable or excessively severe to give judgment over the quality of a project. It is also the reason why private museums and art galleries transfer this responsibility either to their own staff, or to some outside persons, selected on the criterion of affinity of interests. Two – at least – are the immediate consequences: the “de-intellectualization” of criticism and its proliferation in dilettante, superficial forms – on one hand, the “de-ritualization” of the opening as event, its reduction to an occasion of lobby and promotion – on the other.

We are witnessing, in fact, the accumulation, overlapping and conversion of roles. The competences once attributed to the independent critic are taken by the museographer, press officer or exhibit commissioner (curator). In the last decades, the importance of the latter has become overwhelming. What is the curator? A genuine *factotum*: the one who conceives, the manager, the organizer, the promoter, even the critic of his own event. Like a Russian Matryoshka, he “changes his face” whenever necessary. Indispensable and efficient, the curator is “the orchestra-man”; he knows (or thinks he knows) everything, assuming (all) the risks.

In 1972, Harald Szeemann generalizes and imposes this practice, organizing in Kassel *Documenta* – a major exhibition, to which he had invited artists that were performing in different genres, some unconventional. His curatorial project was meant to be seen as a distinct “work”, even though he was gathering and assembling the works of others. Not few were those who rushed to follow suit, given the prestige and veneration that were accompanying such a status. For the artist, it becomes imperative to gain if not the courtesy, at least the attention of a curator. What would he benefit from such a complicity? Undoubtedly, visibility, notoriety and money. But compromises cost as well. Somewhat compelled to sing in the choir, the artist loses his privileged, foreground position, accepting secondary roles or being an extra in scenarios provided by someone else.

The figure of the curator – Paul Ardenne, one of the important analysts of the current artistic phenomenon, believes – appears in the context of “the eventualization of culture and competition between the different structures devoted to art on an international scale”. The French aesthetician speaks of “the cowardice” of the artist who “externalizes project management” to the exhibition commissioner and the institution organizing the show.

Seeking support and protection, the artist “closes his eyes”, dreaming of further compensations. In this practice, Ardenne sees “a form of divestment of the artist in presenting his works”, unjustifiably ceding to the curator the prerogatives that are rightfully his own⁸. The context, as it appears, discourages any form of critical enthusiasm.

Who, however, still imposes the trends? Who gives recognition to the art of good condition? Familiar with the state of contemporary art, René Berger – Swiss critic and philosopher – distinguished between “upstream criticism” and “downstream criticism”⁹. The first one is made by institutions (galleries and museums) or by the authorized mediators (curators, museum directors, gallery owners). It consecrates names, directions, values. The new criticism, in exchange, is “downstreaming”, mimetic and repetitive; follows the trend, offering the public “what is requested”. Lacking maturity and discernment, it “consecrates” stereotypically, re-confirms, and descends easily on the water stream, without resisting the mainstream.

Given the new realities, can we still hope for a “reinvention of criticism”? The resolutions, as many as they are, don’t release a contagious optimism. Yet the efforts aren’t missing... Part of the critical dispositions seems absorbed today by art itself. “The critical art” is one of commitment and involvement. Refusing *ab initio* the neutrality, the criticism practiced at postmodern events no longer regards the aesthetic qualities of the works or projects (become somewhat obsolete and irrelevant), but – vaguely and generic – the systems (capitalist, communist), the institutions, the corporations, the immoral economic and political practices, the impoverishment, the discrimination of minorities, the precipitated urbanization, the devastating interventions on the environment... The militant discourse, especially leftist, usually focuses on an assumed vector of criticism, even though the “artistry” of the intervention is sometimes questionable or less evident.

In the 70s, Jean-François Lyotard proposed the replacement of the term “critic” with the one of “commentator”¹⁰. The purpose of criticism would have been the one of making a commentary on the “work”, as a derivative effect of it, becoming *work* in itself – a singular and distinctive one. How do we reconcile, though, the condition of ancillary, “secondary discourse”, voluntarily parasitizing an outside referent, with the alleged exigency of originality? Can criticism be more than it really is? The suggestions made by Andrei Pleșu, in a text of his youth, seem worth noting: “In order to restore

⁸ Paul Ardenne, « De l'exposition(de l'art) à la surexposition (du commissaire) », in *L'Art même*, nr 21, Bruxelles, 2003, p.6. Cf. « La figure narcissique du commissaire d'exposition », in Maxence Alcade, *L'artiste opportuniste. Entre posture et transgression*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 2011, pp. 52-56.

⁹ Cf. Dominique Berthet, *Pour une critique d'art engagée*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 2013, p. 136.

¹⁰ Jean-François Lyotard, in *Opus International*, no. 70-71, 1979, p. 17.

the dignity of the critical act, we must definitively abandon the utopia of irreproachable criticism”¹¹. Criticism must be done from “the height of the idea, of an ample mental and existential breath and not from the undergrounds of dilettante journalism”¹². There is also a different way of doing criticism, the same was noting, “not advancing towards the consecration of a work, but *starting* from it, in order to better approximate its idea”¹³. The critic-glossator, the one who praises *ex officio*, the perpetual officiator would thus make room for the reflexive critic, the master of his own discourse, able to convince through discernment, honesty and, why not?, elegance.

The conclusions of the specialists who responded to the challenge of *Artpress* magazine have a common denominator: criticism can and must be “reinvented”. How? By privileging new *forms of mediation* (especially interpretative and evaluative); refining the discourse and the writing; abandoning the circumstantial rhetoric, dictated by interest; reactivating the courage of opinion and the pleasure of swimming upstream, against the passing fashions or dominant stream.

¹¹ Andrei Pleșu, *Ochiul și lucrurile*, Editura Meridiane, București, 1986, p. 54.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 98.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 82.