

## Art Criticism: The Transformation of a Moral Matter into a Global Free Speech

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### Abstract

*The role, the form and the author of art criticism have changed. After the experimentalism of the vanguards that broke with the canons of classic arts, a crisis of representation started in the middle of the last century. The introduction of the curator and the collector in the international art circle forced the change of the art criticism model proposed by Denis Diderot.*

*Nowadays, art is judged in the name of the public and society is criticized in the name of art. The boundaries between the duty of the critic, the theoretical and the artist are unclear, leading to a crisis in the art's world. Simultaneously, art criticism was never so massively produced and so massively ignored.*

*This paper intends to be a reflection about the path of criticism throughout history, intersecting the eradication of the distinctions between image and action, production and reception, with the introduction of new global art forms, in the West, and an artistic practice that wants to interfere with reality. Finally, it also intends to understand the process that turned art criticism into an art in its own right, where the disciplinary heterogeneity of its actors transformed a moral matter into a global free speech.*

**Keywords:** art criticism, artist, spectator, public, theoretical.

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*The eighteenth century is considered an aesthetic century: «the century of the critique» according to E. Cassirer (Carreño 2000, 32). In fact, these years were guided by theoretical reflections on art, by the appearance of the first aesthetic categories and their multiplication (decentralizing beauty from the main role), and by ongoing discussions around the appreciation of the artwork.*

*In 1725, the tradition of salons starts with the *Salon Carré*,<sup>1</sup> at the Louvre, disseminating trends and tastes and publicly exposing works that until that time had only been displayed to more distinct groups of society. The blend between the information on art and the debate itself around the artwork gives place*

*to the criticism<sup>2</sup> which appears as a personal account that values artworks and compares them, but also informs about their content. Its wording, brief and effective, has no exhaustive ambition or treaty writer spirits (Bozal 2000, 23).*

*The age of Enlightenment, during the eighteenth century, situated criticism as the fundamental pillar of intellectual activity and valued the judgment in writing about art, in contrast to the writing of treatises, fashion par excellence of the time, characterized by suspending any review about the author and his work. In the perspective of the art critic James Elkins (b. 1954), Denis Diderot (1713–1784) was the founding philosopher of art criticism. *Excellent writer, endowed with a strong intellectual philosophy (...), encyclopedic, of a very refined taste, as exemplified in his criticism to the salon exhibitions, between 1759 and 1781, a model, one of a kind, on how to do criticism* (Serraller 2000, 160).*

*The path of criticism throughout history was made with the contribution of famous names like*

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<sup>1</sup> The *Salon Carré*, so named because of the exposure in 1667 to commemorate the founding of the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture, was not the only real institution with a key role in the dissemination of art. Although the geographical location of most salons is French, and the years of the revolution have contributed to the intensification of his experience due to democratization thereof, other cities began to join the similar nature of exposures (e.g. the exhibitions organized by the Royal Academy of Arts, from 1769).

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<sup>2</sup> Etymologically, the critical word comes from the Greek verb *crino*, meaning judge (Serraller 2000, 155).

Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), Oscar Wilde (1854–1900), Royal Cortissoz (1867–1948), Arthur Clive Bell (1881–1964), Edwin John Canaday (1907–1985) and Clement Greenberg (1909–1994). With the emergence of avant-garde art, the figure of the critic is no longer associated with the external observer of the work, and enters into a transformation process. Avant-garde artists such as Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944), Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) or Kazimir Malevich (1879–1935), according to Boris Groys (b. 1947), change the path of criticism, to the extent that the role of analyzing is no longer reserved to the public, becoming an intrinsic characteristic of the artwork, which judges the collective (Groys 2007, 62).

The end of the 50s were marked by a representation crisis, caused by the appearance of an art that valued a *new social, political and economical postwar environment, relating directly with popular culture (...) and the exploitation's picture of everyday life*. Indeed, the desire to break with abstraction induced movements such as Pop Art in England or the Nouveau Realism in France (Alves, 2012, p. 55). Across the Atlantic, concurrently with the Marcel Duchamp's *readymade* or the exhibition *This is Tomorrow*, held at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in 1956, artists such as Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008) or Jasper Johns (b. 1930) developed *mixed and ambiguous techniques that linked painting to a world of real objects* (Alves 2012, 56). The legacy to later generations will be the unification of the artist, the work and the public, through the creative process, resulting in the emergence of the *Happening* and the *Performance*.

From the perspective of the writer and critic Sally O'Reilly (b. 1971), the totalitarian art idea introduced by the art school of Bauhaus and the Russian Constructivism, was a precursor of the participatory audience, in that *all forms of art were engaged in the production of meaning*. In turn, the *happening* of the sixties, led the audience also to the arena, eradicating the distinctions between image and action, production and reception (O'Reilly, 2009, p. 12). After this moment in history, the *performance* was considered as a challenge to the traditional and a process against the inertia in art.

In the 60s Roland Barthes (1915–1980) said that *the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author* (Barthes, 1987, p. 148). Aware that the text is not a succession of words, but a domain of multiple dimensions that unites different types of writing – *the text is a tissue of quotations* – reversing the classical canons, Barthes says,

*everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered* (Barthes, 1987, pp. 146–147). In fact, all possible interpretive experiences are reserved to the reader, unlike the classical criticism, in which there is not in the literature any other man besides the one that writes (Barthes, 1987, p. 148).

In 1967, shortly thereafter, the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) continues the subversion of the roles of the author and the audience, in the book *Of Grammatology*, by questioning the dichotomous binomials speech/writing, mind/body, man/woman, among others. In the same line of thought, Stanley Fish (b. 1938) formulated the theory of "reader response", arguing that the work is read by an *interpretive community*, rather than an individual person (Fish, 1976).

Throughout the twentieth century, the identity of the participating public was reinvented in each moment of history. The evolution came from a public that demands a role to the avant-garde artist *who keeps control of the proscenium, to an audience that enjoys its subordination to strange experiences devised for them by an artist, to an audience that is encouraged to be a co-producer of the work (and who, occasionally, can even get paid for this involvement)* (Bishop, 2012, p. 277).

The desire to activate the audience in participatory art is at the same time a drive to emancipate it from a state of alienation induced by the dominant ideological order – be this consumer capitalism, totalitarian socialism, or military dictatorship (Bishop 2012, 275). This line of thought developed with names such as Guy Debord (1931–1994), when he equalizes the role of participation and the role of project – artistic practice can no longer revolve around the construction of objects to be consumed by a passive bystander. Instead, there must be an art of action, interfacing with reality, taking steps – however small – to repair the social bond; or Grant Kester that understands the art in a privileged position to counter a world in which 'we are reduced to an atomised pseudocommunity of consumers, our sensibilities dulled by spectacle and repetition' (Bishop 2012, 11).

With this reversal, in place of the critic in the name of society arose social critique in the name of art: the artwork doesn't form the object of judgment but is instead taken as the point of departure for a critique aimed at society and the world (Groys 2007, 63). As a result, it generates a paradox: the art is judged in the name of the public, and society is criticized in the name of art.

According to Elkins, *art criticism*<sup>3</sup> is in *worldwide crisis* (Elkins 2007, 71). Despite the existence of a greater number of writers to disclose criticism through newspapers and magazines – art criticism is massively produced – *there is also the fear of quoting these publications*, and even the most known are *massively ignored* by the historians. (Elkins 2007, 73). This criticism is read by the public, but it is not studied nor deepened, since it circulates outside the contemporary intellectual debate. Elkins calls this critic *diaphanous – it’s like a veil, floating in the breeze of cultural conversations and never quite settling anywhere* (Elkins 2007, 74).

In contemporary times, the role of the critic is losing relevance. Professor Stephen Melville, an expert in the fields of history and theory of contemporary art, points out that the leading role belongs to collectors and curators. Over the last decade of the twentieth century, *the emergence of the international curatorial star, who may have no actual home base or have only the loosest of ties to such a base* (Melville 2007, 114), was evident. This *curatorial star* moves in the circle drawn by the community of biennials, referring to a secondary plan the figure of the critic, since, when it comes into play, his main role has been assumed already, and in the majority of times, the artwork is already sold.

According to the same author, the critic feels a voice – a calling – to develop its function. With university tradition and training in art or art history, the critic carries out his work in studios, galleries, museums, and socially in bars, cafes and parties – basically in the same circle where now the collectors and curators move – sharing their resources with other urban dwellers as the *flâneur* or the *dandy* (Melville 2007, 116).

Boris Groys shares the same opinion regarding the uncertainty on the role of criticism in art, especially in relation to contemporary art. Influenced by the book *Critique of Judgment* (1790), also known as the third Critique of Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), Groys defends the judgment as an

incorruptible activity exempt of bonds with the artist. In the perspective of this author, the role of the art critic or *art commentator* – which, according to the same author, is a qualification that best denotes the function – is that of protecting the artwork. *Images without text are embarrassing, like a naked person in a public space* (Groys 2007, 61). Hence, aside from private collections, the artworks must be accompanied by a label containing at least the author and the title, with this role being reserved for the critic/commentator of art. The text, which promotes better protection, must be absolutely clear, due to the belief that the clearer it is, the more it becomes opaque, thus making it free of any formulation view.<sup>4</sup>

This view totally contrasts with the perspective of Elkins, a defender of the critics *who must be ready to respond with their own opinion*.<sup>5</sup> Aware that a lot of judging activity is hidden behind a brilliant writing that is simultaneously vague (in relation to contemporary art), when Elkins reads a critical newspaper, he likes to feel anger or passion before the exposed arguments. He likes to understand, clearly, the argument about the historical movements, including cubism, surrealism, modernism and postmodernism (Elkins 2003, 79).

Tradition understands the criticism as synonymous with the people’s voice (Serraller 2000). When we read Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), in *The Critic’s Technique in Thirteen Theses*, we understand that this philosopher and literary critic faces criticism as a matter of moral and not as an aesthetic sense. To him, *the public must always be proved wrong, yet always feel represented by the critic* (Benjamin 1979, 67).

In the XXI century, despite the criticism becoming closer to being a literary genre more than a field of art history (Melville 2007, 117), *the old boundaries between making and theorizing*,

<sup>3</sup> The way art criticism emerges is complex and pluralistic. If the critic Peter Plagens (b. 1941) suggested a three-part scheme, which is to emphasize the division between academia and everything else that is external to it, Elkins faces criticism as a hydra with seven heads. The *catalog essay* (ordered by department stores), the *academic treatise* (cultural references of Benjamin, Bourdieu or Buber), the *cultural criticism*, the *conservative harangue* (the author recites about what art should be), the *philosopher’s essay*, the *descriptive art criticism* (whose purpose is to transport readers to the works that they cannot visit) and the *poetic art criticism* (what is relevant is the writing itself) are an attempt to draw a unified critical image of contemporary art (Elkins 2007, 80).

<sup>4</sup> Clement Greenberg (1909-1994) shares the theory of Boris Groys in the essay *Complaints of an Art Critic*. There, he defends that *you have your prejudices, your leanings and inclinations, but you are under the obligation to recognize them as that and keep them from interfering* (Elkins 2007, 91).

<sup>5</sup> The ideal art criticism, from the perspective of this author, is personified in Peter Schjeldahl (b. 1942), *The New Yorker* writer. Published in 2002, by the occasion of the exhibition *Surrealism: Desire Unbound*, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (N.Y.), it is *just independent enough to count as a new sense of surrealism*. Schjeldahl differs from Greenberg’s viewpoint in the rejection of surrealism, or from the perspective of Hal Foster and Rosalind Krauss favoring the same. For Elkins, the writer in question records a definitive position with measurable consequences and embodies what is best in contemporary writing (Elkins 2003).

historicizing and displaying, criticizing and affirming have long been eroded (Rogoff 2007, 97). According to I. Rogoff, instead of "criticism" being an act of judgment addressed to a clear-cut object of criticism, we now recognize not just our own imbrication in the object or the cultural moment, but also the performative nature of any action or stance we might be taking in relation to it (Rogoff 2007, 98). In this context, it is manifestly obvious that it is impossible to materialize the separation between being artistic and being theoretical.

Boris Groys, James Elkins, Irit Rogoff and Stephen Melville all agree that contemporary criticism is in crisis. Perhaps because we still think about the critic in the sense of Melville, like the urban inhabitant governed by the vocation that was given to him. But after all, what is happening is that we are witnessing a new mapping of the art market. The apparent democratic progress raised the extension of aesthetic notions, within the art history own limits (Lageira, 2009).

Today, the rewriting of the Global Programme, provided by the entry in history of forgotten concepts and events, resulted in a period of expansion of art and creativity (Weibel 2013, 26). The five hundred years of Western hegemony, formed, according to the CEO of the ZKM (Center for Art and Media) Peter Weibel (b. 1944), by the dynamic quadruple – colonialism, capitalism, slavery and racism (Weibel, 2013, p. 22) – foresaw their end in the post-World War II, when new types of aesthetic discourses and new artists penetrated the culture of Western art (Seppä, 2010, p. 18). At the same time, all over the world, a new circle drawn by the community of art biennials highlighted the role of collectors and curators (Melville, 2007, p. 114). *The art of today does not represent only a new art, it represents also a new art form, an art that is expanding around the globe* (Belting & Buddensieg, 2013, p. 28).

Although the term global is understood as a greater proximity between cultures, religions and

languages, the ethnic and identity differences are intensified (Weibel, 2013, p. 20). Therefore, the pretext of *learning to live with pluralism*, favored by the American art critic and philosopher Arthur Danto (1924–2013), appears to become an aesthetic ecumenism, as we continue to evaluate contemporary issues by means of a traditional system (Lageira, 2009).

Roland Barthes in his theory on death began the ideology that later would originate *the definition of art as a collective production*, influenced by authors like Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975), Michel Foucault (1926–1984) or Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002). From this point of view, *the Author with a capital A, as in the poetics of Romanticism*, was deconstructed by the linguistic-discursive function of the post structural criticism (Tota 2000, 29–31), referring to the dissipation of the boundary between genius and public, artist and critic.

In conclusion, the emancipation of the audience turned the visitor's role into a performative user (Weibel 2013, 27). In addition to the artwork being in many cases in a constant change, the intervention of the public on the artwork, made the public an artist. *The art critic's betrayal of the criteria of public taste turned him into an artist* (Groys 2007, 68). In this process of change, in which the visitor has become a performative agent, like the art critic when it acts in his own, the alleged principles of judgment or criticism remained, although their form was changed. Both Boris Groys and Irit Rogoff share the vision that the boundaries between criticism and art are vanishing. Step by step, the artist and the critic became a complement of each other, while the traditional boundary between artist and curator, critic and curator, started disappearing. In fact, art criticism became an art in its own right, where the disciplinary heterogeneity of its actors transformed a moral matter into a global free speech.

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