

VISION CULTURE LECTURE @ Shalini Ganendra Fine Art

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ART CRITICISM & COMMENTARY

Good evening and thank you very much for coming to our lecture about art criticism. First of all we would like to thank Shalini Ganendra and Volker Wolf for inviting us to Malaysia and for organizing this program and lecture.

Our lecture will consist of three different chapters which you see here on the wall:

1. Art Criticism - German and western traditions. Current situation - our own perspective
2. Art Tour: Art Fairs, Biennials, Artist in Residency
3. A trip to Brazil and Argentina

Bild: Gabriel von Max (1840-1915): Affen als Kunstrichter, um 1889,
Bayrische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, München, Neue Pinakothek

We would like to start with this very well known painting by the German artist Gabriel von Max. Who lived from 1840 until 1915. It is being used as an illustration for many articles dealing with art criticism in Germany. The title is "Monkeys as Judges of Art". What looks like a harsh critique of professional art critics isn't really meant like that. Von Marx who was an extremely successful painter at his time was celebrated by the critics. The reason why he painted this: He was an admirer of Charles Darwin and he lived together with 14 monkeys in his house. He would study, draw and photograph them in preparation of his paintings.

Art Criticism - German and middle European traditions and perspectives

Now we would like to give you a brief historical outline of art criticism in Germany and other western countries. We have put together a short list of the most influential theorists and practitioners of art criticism:

Denis Diderot (1713-1784)

He is regarded as the first professional art critic.
The French writer and philosopher was a key figure in the Age of Enlightenment.
He wrote about his intense visits to artist studios.
He interviewed other artists and collectors about these artists.

His critiques were written by hand and they were distributed via diplomatic pouch throughout Europe.

He wrote his commentaries for a very selected, exclusive set of subscribers of not more than 15 - 30 persons among them dealers, intellectuals and collectors in Europe. For example Catherine the Great of Russia.

His writing praxis shows that he was very close to the art market by making direct proposals for acquisitions through his intellectual writing.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

Most prominent German Philosopher of the Age of Enlightenment.

He developed groundbreaking theories about the "Beautiful" and the "Sublime"

He can be regarded as the first philosopher who developed a modern aesthetic theory

Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867)

For Baudelaire there were two different modes of art criticism. In the chapter "What is the good of criticism?" in his work - The Salon, 1846, he differentiated between "The cold mathematical criticism which, on the pretext of explaining everything has neither love nor hate, and voluntarily strips itself of every shred of temperament."

On the other hand there is the "amusing and poetic criticism" which according to Baudelaire should be "partial passionate and political, that is to say written from an exclusive point of view, but a point of view that opens up the widest horizons."

Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918)

A French poet and art writer.

He had very close relationships with many contemporary artists of his time (such as Picasso, Chagall, Marcel Duchamp).

In 1913 he published a compilation of his reviews under the title „Les peintres cubistes“. He coined the label "Cubism".

Walter Benjamin (1892-1940)

German Philosopher, critic and translator.

In 1935 he published his groundbreaking essay: "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility" which formulated a completely new theory of then new artistic media like photography and film.

Clement Greenberg (1909-1994)

Important New York based critic. From the mid 1940s until the late 1960s he dominated the reception of American Expressionism. He also coined the term "Colourfield Painting". For Clement Greenberg the best criticism originated when the work was still not part of history and yet not just exhibited. In a state where it was somewhere in-between. For him, being an example for the authoritarian type of critic, there were only two kinds of art: good art and bad art.

Rosalind Krauss (*1941)

New York based art critic and theorist. University professor and curator.

Started to publish in 1965 in "Art Forum" and "Art in America".

In 1976 she founded her own magazine "October".

Since then the quarterly magazine has gained a lot of recognition for its high quality critiques and theorist essays dealing with the newest developments of contemporary visual culture (including film, new media, performance etc.)

Susan Sontag (1933-2004)

New York based American writer, essayist and art critic.

She wrote numerous important essays on photography, film and contemporary art

One of her important works is: "On Photography". Published in 1977.

Jerry Saltz (*1951)

Also from New York. He used to be a freelance art critic for many years.

Former senior art critic for Village Voice.

Since 2006 he is the senior art critic and columnist for the New York magazine.

Three times nominated for the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism.

He is teaching at several universities.

His wife is Roberta Smith.

Roberta Smith

Current senior art critic for the New York Times (writing for NYT since 1986).

She worked also worked for Museums and galleries.

She followed closely Donald Judd and minimalism.

She wrote numerous essays for catalogues.

Her articles are clear, insightful and have an accessible writing style.

She writes also about decorative arts, design and architecture.

Marc Spiegler (*1968)

American born specialist for the international art market. Based in Zurich, Switzerland.

Used to write for several American magazines and newspapers like Art & Auction or the Chicago Tribune.

He likes to think out radical theses.

He has a profound knowledge about art market constellations, prices and connections.

#1 international networker.

He is well respected and has been invited to many panel discussions worldwide.

He made a very astonishing career step for an art critic: In 2007 he was appointed one of the two directors of Art Basel, the world's most prestigious art fair.

Last but not least:

Bice Curiger (*1948)

Swiss Art Critic and Curator.

In 1984 she founded the Swiss art Magazine "Parkett". She still is editor-in-chief.

The magazine comes out quarterly.

It's unique selling point is that it is made in very close cooperation/collaboration with the artists being portrayed. Among them the most famous established artists and the most promising emerging artists of the world.

It can be said that „Parkett“ has been setting the tone for a new kind of non-antagonistic art criticism, based on partnership between the critic and the artist.

Bice Curiger is the Curator of the next Venice Biennale in 2011.

Here we just mention a few art critics from Germany:

Eduard Beaucamp (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung)>>>Senior Critic. Has been criticized for his strong promotion of the anti-modernist Eastern German Painting School which was linked closely to the communist regime.

Bazon Brock (former professor of aesthetics, University of Wuppertal)

>>>He is famous for his guided tours for a general public during Documenta or important art fairs which he calls „Besucherschule“ (visitor's school). He sees himself more as a mediator who arouses a certain interest in his audience rather than criticizing art in a negative way.

Werner Spies

>>>The former director of museum Centre Pompidou in Paris.

Now writing for several German national newspapers.

He is a good example for a retired art historian/museum director now working as a critic.

Hanno Rauterberg

Architecture critic for the renowned weekly newspaper Die ZEIT. Became famous for an article about art criticism in 2007.

He was stating that the critic should be totally autonomous: no alliances with artists, gallerists, curators or collectors. No income from other art related sources than writing. There was a huge debate about this in Germany. In the end he was standing quite alone with his thesis. For the majority of art critics, who are working on a freelance basis, it is simply impossible to refuse offers from galleries and museums to write for their catalogues, to hold opening speeches or even to curate exhibitions there. In Germany there are only about 10 art critics like him who work exclusively for one publication and get a fixed monthly salary.

Among them are:

Niklas Maak (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung). He covers the most important contemporary art exhibitions in a lively and ironic style.

Holger Liebs (Editor in Chief of Monopol art magazine, former Süddeutsche Zeitung). He also covers the most important exhibitions, sometimes in experimental formats. His magazine always tries to set new trends. But often they have a short durability.

Isabelle Graw (Founder of Texte zur Kunst)
Insider magazine, critical and theoretical, follows mostly conceptual art, with political/critical impacts.

Our perspective

As you have seen there is a widespread heterogeneity in art criticism in today's Germany. The old school art critic who was send out by the editors of a daily newspaper to review an exhibition and came back with maybe a very negative result (which of course he had to justify in his article) does almost no longer exist.

The common praxis today is very different from that. Most reviews are done by freelance art critics who need to write for different media in order to make their living. They would send a monthly list of upcoming exhibitions or of artists they would like to write about to their editors. And they have the expertise and the enthusiasm. Although, one must say, they are paid very badly. But this is how the system functions. Most editors almost never have the possibility to leave their desks and look around in galleries, museums, artist's studios, or at art fairs.

As the space for reviews, especially about contemporary art, is quite limited in most publications there is almost no space for radically negative critiques left. The tendency today is not to waste the valuable space of a cultural section for extremely negative reviews. That might sound a little bit strange as concerning theater or concerts negative reviews are still very much appreciated. But concerning contemporary art also the readers are not very much interested in reading about a bad show that is not worth going there. And even many art critics of today don't want to be called „critics“ anymore because of the negative connotations of the word placing the writer in fundamental antagonism to the artist.

For example: The New York critic René Ricard, a writer for the well established magazine „Art Forum“, refuses to be called a critic: „In point of fact I'm not an art critic. I'm an enthusiast. I like to drum up interest in artists who have somehow inspired me to be able to say something about their work.“ In fact: Many art critics today prefer to call themselves art journalists or even art mediators.

As you can see, the role and self perception of the art critic have changed a lot. As we have mentioned before an art critic would normally make proposals of exhibitions which are promising enough to write about. So to say of artists who have proved (at least to him) that their work has a certain relevance.

However, when the artists fail to fulfill these expectations they would of course be criticized explicitly by every professional critic. But in an art system which is highly professionalized this happens very rarely.

So the art critic has become more of a mediator than a resolute judge. That does not necessarily mean neutral reviewing. But his main tasks are very different from what the general public used to think or expect. Today's art critic is busy depicting new tendencies, discovering new talents and pointing the way to the future. His mobility is one of his most important skills. And he has to be a good networker maintaining contacts to all the different players of the art system. It is essential to get access to artist's studios, you need to know museum people and curators to get profound information about upcoming shows. And of course you need to be well connected also with the participants of the art market like collectors and gallerists.

In doing so you must be very well trained in what you are writing about and how you approach your the subject you are writing about. A profound art historical knowledge of course is still important. But an art critic today should also have a good knowledge of other fields of contemporary life because they play an important role in the production and interpretation of contemporary art. He should be informed about current aesthetic discourse as well as philosophy, sociology, politics, natural sciences, the environment and many other discourses and subjects of the everyday life. In addition to that he should know a good amount about movies, music, literature and even such things as computer games because all these different influences can be possible inspirations for contemporary artistic practice.

A good art critic should not stick to his criteria throughout his career. He should be prepared to learn constantly and to be skeptical about preferences he may have developed five or ten years ago. Otherwise he will be out of the circuit like it happened to the famous Clement Greenberg who was a lifelong advocate of postwar expressionism and the New York School. In the end he finished in kind of a dead end street calling all the new developments like Pop Art, Minimal Art or Conceptual Art only "junk". Recent art history has proven the opposite. Artists like Donald Judd or Joseph Kosuth have become essential figures of art history which many young artists are referring to in their work. For Greenberg they did not play any important role.

Terry Barratt, a former professor of visual arts at the University of North Texas and the author of a small but very informative book with the title "Criticizing photographs", formulates what, also according to our personal estimation, art criticism should be today: "Criticism is an informed discourse about art to increase understanding and appreciation of art."

Is there a crisis of art criticism?

As we have said before there are only a few permanently employed art critics left on the German scene. Most art critics have another source of primary income. Either they are working for universities, for art academies, for museums. Many of them give guided tours in museums or they even work for more popular mass media and only write art critiques from time to time. As we mentioned before: the classical art critic working for one newspaper or magazine is kind of an endangered species. Freelancers are the real discoverers of new tendencies, emerging talents and upcoming galleries. But they depend on their editors. Negative critique is either not printed or disliked. The crisis of which art journalists like Hanno Rauterberg of DIE ZEIT speak about has a lot to do with the alliances and dependencies between art critics, artists, galleries, museums, collectors and other institutions.

But the question is: How can neutrality be achieved in the daily business of the critic? We would argue that you have to find a proper balance between being part of the art system and keeping your autonomous and independent standpoint outside of it. You don't have to refuse the invitation to a dinner party from a gallery. But you should still review their show along your own criteria. Everything else would be pure public relations instead of high quality journalism.

Peter Schjeldahl, the head art critic of "The New Yorker", puts it this way, speaking about the relation between critics and artists: "A critic who feels no anguish in relating to artists is a prostitute. A critic who never relates to artists, fearing contamination, is a virgin. Neither knows a thing about love."

Writing about art, sooner or later, you will be confronted with a lot of conflicts of interest. Just to give you a few examples for possible conflicts of interests:

Should a critic write about art which he collects?

Should he collect anyway?

Should a critic ask to purchase an art work from an artist he wrote about, probably even at a discounted price?

Should a critic accept a work of an artist he wrote about as a gift?

Should a critic accept the invitation of an art fair or a private collector to be flown in and accommodated in a luxury hotel?

We know that for every art critic it is very difficult to find the right way to keep his autonomy. In many cases he will depend on accepting invitations. Otherwise he would not be able to travel to certain remote places and broaden his perspectives. But an art critic should never forget that he is not a businessman or in any respect a person who should profit from the movements of the art market he is able to influence at least to a certain extent. Then he will lose his job very soon anyway. By the way this just happened to a colleague of ours who offered her publicist „help“ to collectors by putting a box number advertisement into a big newspaper. She got fired instantly.

But coming back to artist/critic relationships: In some situations it would be just very impolite to refuse to accept a small drawing, a signed catalogue or another small piece of art an artist would want give to you. This kind of gift can be very personal. But by no means they should be sold or brought to an auction. You should be aware about your professional ethics.

There is a long tradition of art critics being deeply involved with the artist's activities. They have launched or labeled art movements and they have popularized different styles. It is a pure necessity that critics and artists are more or less bound together in a symbiotic way: They become friends or allies. They become members of the same intellectual circles.

Just to give a few examples: Cubism would not have become an important recognized art movement without the publications about it by Apollinaire. Surrealism could not have done without André Breton and the New York School owes its popularity and widespread recognition to Clement Greenberg and his colleague Herald Rosenberg.

The art critic nowadays is more like a scout in the jungle of the art world. But as we have said before, he also becomes more and more an endangered species. Especially younger people don't rely any more on traditional media like daily newspapers and often quite expensive art magazines. They tend to inform themselves through the internet. Art blogs for example function as a substitute for traditional media. And many people just trust the friends they have on Facebook, twitter or other social networks when it comes to recommendations for museum or gallery shows. And there are even more threats for the small community of art critics. New mostly commercially oriented magazines are coming into the market which are just reproducing the press releases they get from the museums or galleries. And new forms of non professional art criticism are tried out. Some media even encourage their readers to try themselves as sporadic critics replacing their long-standing staff of writers or correspondents'.

Essential questions

Every good art critic sets up his own methods and questions for judging art. And we guess that you want to know which methods and questions we do apply to a work of art. So here we have put together five major rules which we think are essential for writing a good and informative review or critique.

1. Perception of art

The art critic should deliver a very detailed description of the object he is writing about: What do I see? Which materials and artistic techniques have been used to realize the art work? Did the artist use traditional artistic material like colour, canvas, wood etc. or did he use unconventional or generic things taken from the everyday life? How are different materials combined?

2. Categorization/Contextualization

Under which art historical, philosophical, aesthetical, sociological, political or whatsoever non artistic aspect can the art work be seen? Does it refer to a certain discourse, tradition or field of knowledge? Is it ironic?

3. Uniqueness

What makes it an art work? Why is it more than an ordinary object even if it is made out of ordinary objects?

4. Criteria

The critic should reveal his own criteria: Why do I consider it worth writing about? What makes it so special, appealing or innovative? Does it widen my perception? Can I learn something out of it?

5. Addressing the public

The critic should offer the reader a proposal how to evaluate a certain art work, artist or exhibition under the given circumstances. He should broaden the reader's own understanding. He should try to encourage the readers own thoughts and interpretation, e.g. by asking specific questions without elaborately answering them.

Remember:

These are just single operations which should be contained in a relevant art review. There is no given order. A good author will not construct his critique in a schematic or mechanical way. He should try to find a new and fresh approach every time he writes about a new piece of art.

We would propose:

>>> Select properly what is worth writing about.

>>> Try not to be an authoritative judge, but more a mediator between the artist, his work and the viewer.

>>>Keep in mind: your evaluation may not be the right one from here to eternity.

The artistic praxis in different countries and on different continents can hardly be compared. Even in a globalized world we easily lack the proper instruments of understanding a work from a cultural context with which we are not really familiar.

But we guess that you want to know some of the criteria that we consider when we write about art.

That brings us to the concluding question:

What is a <i>good work of art</i> ?

Let's sum it up like this:

- **First of all. It has to touch the viewer's senses.**
- **It has to have an inner logic and coherence, that means that a single piece must fit into the consistency of the work that the artist stands for.**
- **It should show us somehow why art in general and this specific art work in particular is necessary for a better understanding of the world.**
- **It should make us think about ourselves and the reality we live in.**
- **It should enable us to communicate with others about its formal aspects and possible meaning.**

Bringing to light the sometimes hidden qualities of an art work or artist to a broader audience is the privileged, yet very difficult task of an art critic.

2. Art Tour: Art fairs, Biennales, Artist in Residencies

- Art fairs:

Art Basel: 1968

Art Basel Miami Beach: 2002

Frieze Art Fair London: 2003

Art Forum Berlin: 1996

Art Cologne: 13. September 1967

Artissima Turin: 1995

Art Brussels: 28th edition

Fiac Paris: 37th edition

Paris Photo: 1997

Arco Madrid: 29th edition

The Armory Show: 1994

SP Arte: 6th edition

Satellite Fairs: Liste seit 1996

Biennalen

Biennale Venedig: 1885

Biennale São Paulo: 1951

Berlin Biennale: 1998

Istanbul Biennial: 1987

Manifesta: European Biennale of contemporary art: 1996 Rotterdam, 1998 Luxemburg, 2004

San Sebastian, 2010 Murcia, Spain

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