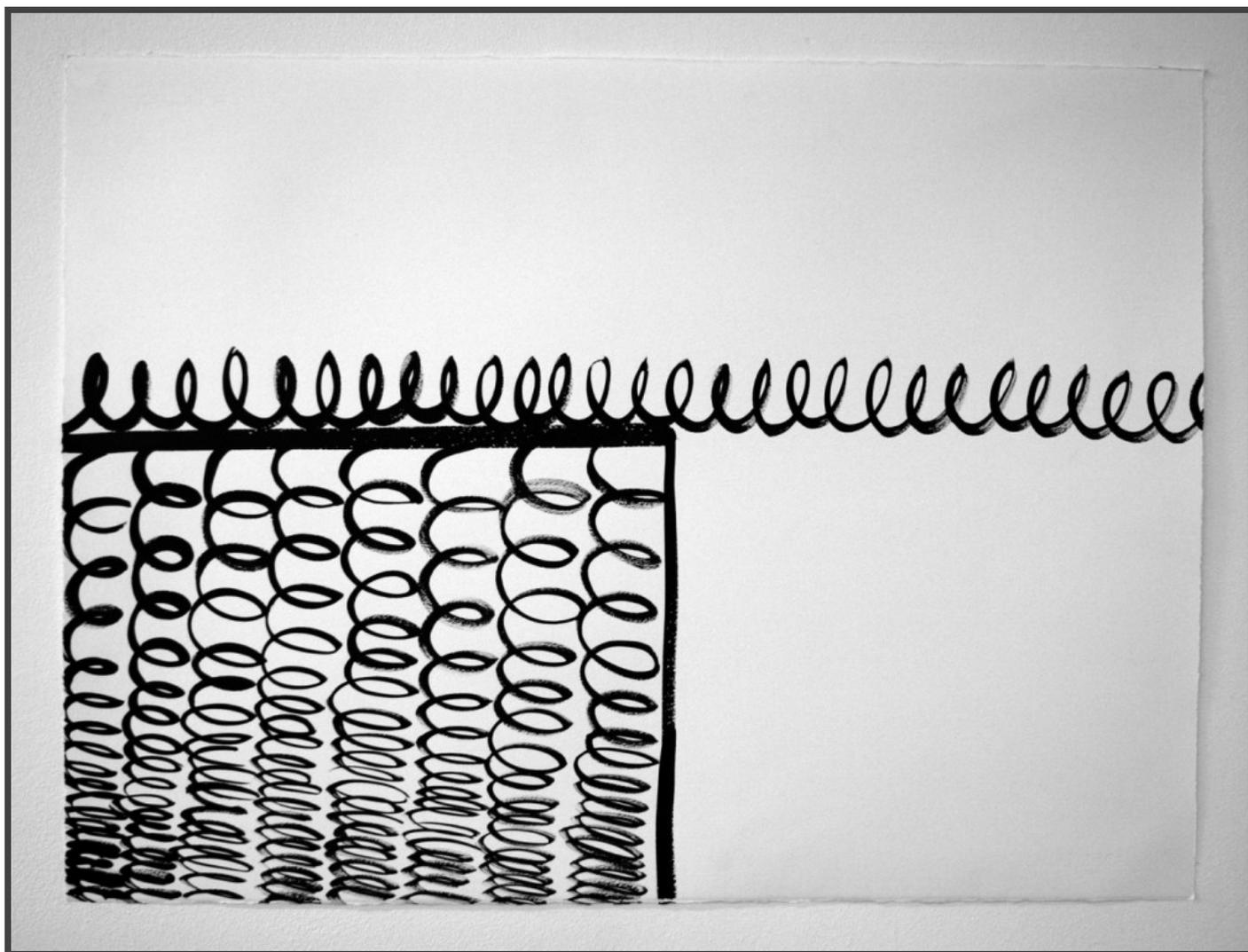


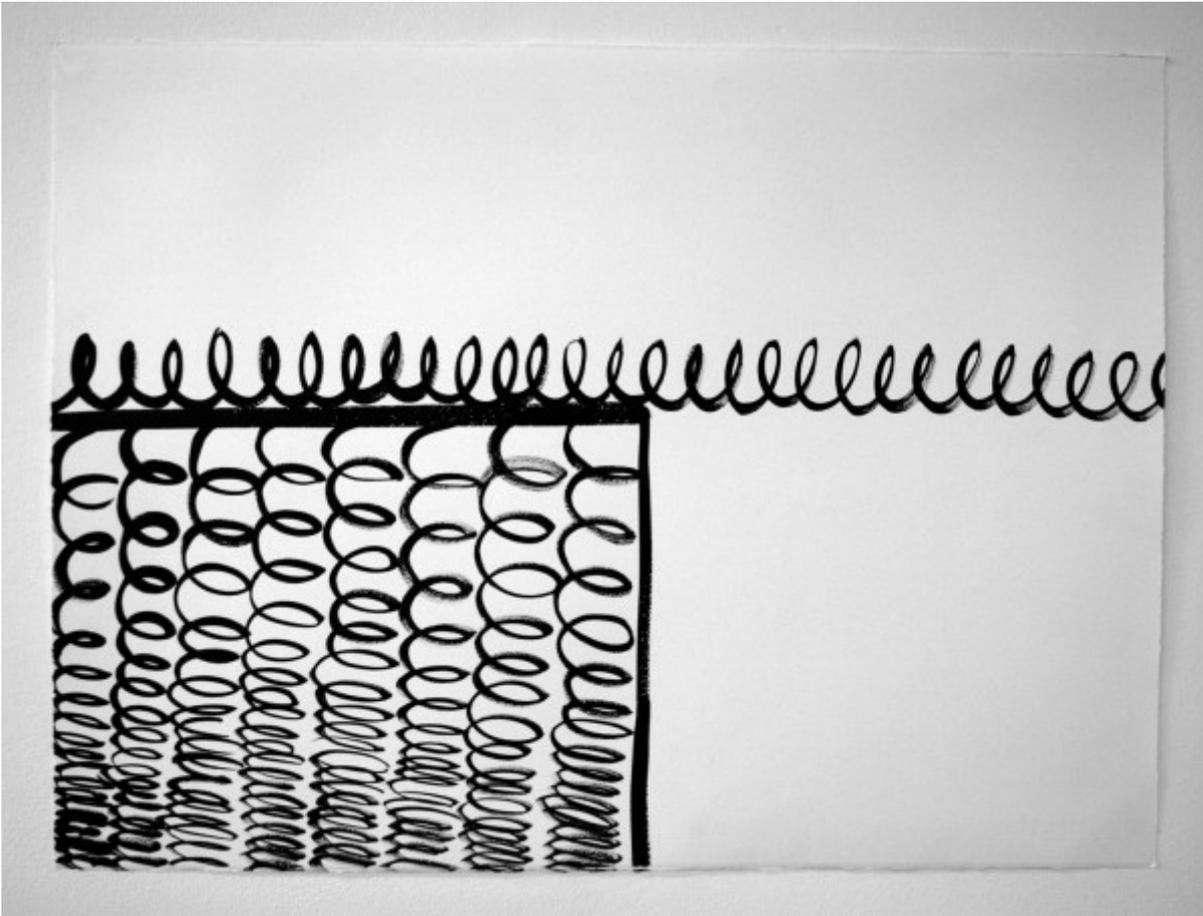


Critics' Conversation #1

Aoife Rosenmeyer, Helen Lager, Max Glauner, Samuel Schellenberg

In January 2021, while all of Switzerland was shielded from the danger of exposure to exhibitions, Aoife Rosenmeyer spoke to critics and journalists Max Glauner, Helen Lager and Samuel Schellenberg. All three have significant experience covering art – and other cultural forms – for broadsheet newspapers. The subject of the discussion was the contemporary perspective on art criticism: Is it a viable practice? Who needs it? And what informs it?





Sam Porritt, *Going Forward*, 2010, courtesy the artist and VITRINE, London/Basel

Aoife Rosenmeyer: Let's start with a basis for discussion: what do you regard as successful art writing or criticism?

Helen Lager: When people talk about it. When there is a response from readers, or when you can tell people a story they haven't heard before; when there's a reaction.

Samuel Schellenberg: When an article prompts people who tend to not go to museums or be interested in contemporary art to visit an exhibition – just to form their own opinion — even if the article wasn't very positive about the show. That's satisfying.

Max Glauner: I'm satisfied when there's luck in my writing, when I manage to get close to the artwork, when I discover something in the writing process that I hadn't seen before and when someone out there reacts positively. The first thing is to describe an artwork so the reader is able to picture it and get a sense of it. The second is to reflect on it such a way that you see something the artist – to kind of bring the artwork to itself, as it were.

AR: In a discussion last summer, Susanne Kübler of the *Tages-Anzeiger* suggested that reviews per se are outmoded or unpopular.^[1] [\[1\] \[b-n-l/critics-conversation-1/pdf#a2\]](#) [\[b-n-l/critics-conversation-1/pdf#1a\]](#) She suggested that authors have to camouflage their analysis or judgements in other forms. Does this reflect your experience?

SS: It's definitely not my experience, because at *Le Courier* we continue to produce reviews in every cultural field. But it is a trend I can observe in the French part of Switzerland. More and more newspapers tend to do interviews or portraits of artists or authors, rather than publish reviews. They think readers are more interested in that kind of storytelling. I don't know where that comes from. But it's my impression that newspapers like *Le Temps* and *24*

heures are now returning to critique. At Le Courier we never turned away from it. I still feel that people like to read an opinion coming from a person who knows their subject.

HL: I think this relates also to the changing role of the critic. We're not like John Ruskin in the 19th century, defending modern art against conservative positions. There is so much artwork nowadays that just by choosing to cover some art we suggest it is interesting.

MG: It's easy to adopt a pessimistic cultural attitude, but in terms of art criticism and the classic review section it's appropriate. For a number of reasons, I think we are at the dead end of critique itself. A three-hundred-year process of civilization is at stake. Many things deny and negate a critical position, starting with the economic aspect, and the question of who publishes and where it is published. Or look on the other side to the art, the art market and art field – they don't want or need us anymore. There's no real interest in us writing anything. One art genre I have followed for a long time is performance art, but even there you have no chance to take a critical position because you are not able to see the necessary range of work. You couldn't even see all the performances at the Venice Biennale. You're removed from this development. The arts themselves deny the possibility of critique. It's no longer possible or wanted. Not by the artists, nor by the audience, the curators, art dealers or collectors. It's part of the PR machinery. One Instagram post is all it takes. Clicks and likes have taken over classification and evaluation – this is the utopia of the internet and social media, that this is no longer left to the hegemony of a peer group.

The broader picture is the cultural-historical paradigm shift from text to icons. Criticism has been transformed into adoration. Emotion and the adoration of an artwork is what editors want. You have to communicate an emotional atmosphere and then you've got the readers. But this is the end of thinking, of criticism. We're the last generation to get something more from the artworks than adoration and fake emotions.

AR: I appreciate the point you are making about saturation, and the impossibility of a survey, given the volume of art being produced. But isn't that an argument for critique, given the critic's role in sorting and selecting?

MG: You can't select. It's impossible. Selection in the musical field began with Spex magazine and others. It wasn't possible to have an overview. You gained a personal relationship to the bands and clubs and then you wrote: this is it. Nowadays it's not about critique, it's clicks and likes, but no reflection. In the Instagram world, the possibility of reasoning has gone.

AR: Helen and Samuel, would you agree with Max, that a more embodied or emotive critique has come into being? Are you able or encouraged to respond personally?

HL: Of course. I like to read texts that are emotional, when someone is engaged. Sensing the author's feelings makes it more interesting. I don't see the negative side of that if you can transmit emotions and make someone think as well. I don't think it's the end of thinking.

SS: I also believe in putting some emotional aspects on paper. It's true that in French-speaking journalism you almost never write in the first person; it's changing a bit but much less so than in Anglo-Saxon countries. I've never written anything as 'I' and I probably won't, but it doesn't mean that it's not me who visited the thing, who reflected on it or made a joke about it. And readers recognize me in my writing. Some people read a journalist because they like the way they write and they will read them, no matter what the subject is. I hope so.

AR: Noting that Le Courier is managed by journalists, I anticipate there is empathy between the management and the journalists there. But that's not always the case; we have large media

houses operating in this country too. Do you think we pay enough attention to editorial or management influence in coverage of the arts?

SS: The cultural section of *Le Courrier* is quite old-fashioned, still a republic within the republic and quite autonomous. Which is something that has changed recently in other newspapers, and is one reason they are no longer doing reviews. It's directors who said they didn't get enough clicks. I think that my colleagues [at *Le Courrier*] look at us with respect and admiration and sometimes they just don't understand what we do, but they let us do our thing.

AR: Helen, can you give us a different perspective, as you often write for a large media house? Do you sense direction from on high?

HL: I am a freelance journalist, so I write for different newspapers. If the newspaper has a partnership with a big cultural event, of course you can still be a critic, but it is questionable how far you can go. You won't write a devastating critique. But you can still be critical and I have been told before that I can write what I feel. But in the back of my mind I knew we had a partnership. One time, a comedian who was also a columnist at the newspaper did a show; I criticized it harshly, and this was discussed, but I was not censored. They said, "He's our columnist, why are you being so hard on him?" Total independence might be an illusion.

SS: Do you have the impression that there are guidelines given by the newspaper management, saying you should discuss this exhibition, or this event?

HL: Of course. I also have written for a cultural newspaper that is financed by cultural institutions. So if these institutions have an important production it has to be covered. And this is in the interest of the readers as well.

AR: But you also have the opportunity to cover smaller, local events?

HL: Absolutely. We are expected to propose topics people are not familiar with, like introducing an upcoming artist or an alternative art space. Otherwise, you don't need a critic who knows the scene. We help people discover things.

AR: Max, as you work freelance across a spectrum of publications, what do you think?

MG: The publications I work for cannot cover local events. Admittedly, I often pitch topics that fly under the radar as local events but are still relevant and important to me – especially when it comes to performances and gallery exhibitions. Nevertheless, local culture – music, theater and art – doesn't play much of a role any more. Another example is how the *NZZ* deals with reviews. They have changed the format and now the arts section has three pages featuring lengthy contributions on a ski jumper, a Netflix series and knights. In December they fired two editors, one who was responsible for theater and the other who did film.^[2] [b-n-l/critics-conversation-1/pdf#b2] Review essays in these areas will therefore remain an exception.

The whole idea was to throw out reviews. Only the lighthouses will be reviewed – perhaps. I think it is a reaction to how the scene as a whole has developed. Not just art but theatre, too. Just remember Stemmann's *Faust I/II* that came to Zurich from the Thalia Theater Hamburg.^[3] [b-n-l/critics-conversation-1/pdf#c2] Not one person at the theater was able to read and interpret the text in a broader sense. So where are the criteria and what are they? What reasonable position does this leave? When the performance itself says, «Well, we are beyond criticism.» Art and theater are moving beyond the need for validation. It's a Trumpist stance: you can say anything and, in that moment, it is true, not an alternative fact. It's the same in

the art world. The only option left is art adoration in a bubble: you're the fan, you acclaim the shit and the shit sells. We're on a very slippery path towards Guy Debord's «society of the spectacle.»

AR: Helen, you've said that the most important landmark productions or exhibitions must be addressed. That also makes for easy targets, because it's clear where those landmarks are. Does it make the risks greater, because you might disagree publicly with something that is highly visible, or does it make the risk less because, given the consensus that they are important, they won't be criticized?

HL: It doesn't matter to me if it's a big famous event or not. I use the same criteria when covering every event, no matter whether it is a famous show on a world tour or an alternative theater in a basement. Something either fascinates me or it doesn't.

AR: Do you think there is a need for criticism? You all tell me you have complete critical freedom, which is great to hear. Max, you suggest there is no need for criticism....

MG: Not that there's no need. As authors and cultural journalists, we are part of a project called civilization and democracy. This means that we have an obligation to enlighten people, to make them reflect and to put a stop to the rampant stupidity, or, if you like, to give readers a chance to free themselves from self-inflicted ignorance. Even if it is only in the relatively insignificant field of art – existential ills, social grievances and political decisions can be safely dealt with here in an exemplary way. We support and comment on this, and critical guidance is important. Anything else is propaganda. But reflection and criticism requires freedom, distance, independence, and this is lost at the moment – even though anyone can publish instantly on the Internet. But independent writing on the Internet is not a business model, the economic basis is not there. Even foundation-supported cultural journalism will not change this. We cannot, for example, afford to travel long distance to exhibitions or biennials, our fees don't allow it. So you pay out of your own pocket or you get invited. We do have platforms that allow us to cover some events, but the possibility of writing and being independent is more and more illusory. It's a development in the art market and in the arts themselves as they are turned into events and performative forms.

HL: But we don't write for the people who make the events, we write for the readers.

AR: What has been the greatest consequence of anything you've written? What are the risks you run?

HL: It might have been paranoia, but I once went swimming in the river in Bern and crossed an actor's path. I had just criticized his part in a play and I felt that he gave me the evil eye.

SS: Once on a trip abroad to a biennial I found myself in the middle of an exchange of gunfire. But it was pure coincidence, and neither of the gunmen had ever read my work – it was nothing personal. The worst that can happen is that the museum doesn't publish your article on Facebook because you wrote a negative review.

HL: Readers react as soon as you touch on religion or animal rights. I have written about the most scandalous artworks in history, and you count on someone writing to say that it's sick, and you're not sure if they are talking about your article or the art itself.

AR: Do you refer or respond to digital feedback? What feedback do you generally get?

MG: There is relatively little feedback. I know that some people read me, but direct responses are rare. They come from friends, colleagues and artists – rarely from the institutions. I have

no illusions. Our impact is nearly zero.

One tendency I want to mention over all the years I have worked as a freelance art and theater critic is the massive increase in PR companies. When I started out, nobody dealt with the press professionally. There was the director at the theater, or the gallerist, or the curator and his secretary who spoke to the press. Now for a single journalist there are five communication managers from the institution giving you the catalogue and pre-written articles. Following the press crisis of 2001-2004, I thought all my colleagues had left. Many of them had started PR businesses.

AR: That's true. How do you resist the pressure of PR companies?

MG: You mustn't resist. You cannot. Festivals, theaters and biennials pay for the trips, hotels and travel expenses. It's the only way to do your job at the moment. Your online publication won't pay.

HL: If someone gives me a press release, I don't feel obliged to incorporate it into my text. We're not enemies, but we're also not part of a collaboration, even if that's what they like to call it sometimes. I was invited to ARCO Madrid by the Spanish tourist board, and I enjoyed it very much, but I didn't feel that because of the invitation I had to write that it was the best art fair I'd ever seen. PR and journalism are different jobs.

SS: Working for a small newspaper like Le Courier, I'm not so much on the radar of big PR companies. I sometimes get invited but generally I don't go. I'll go to the Venice Biennale myself anyway, I prefer it that way. While I receive a salary from the newspaper, I don't need expenses. I can ask the newspaper to pay for the train but I cover the hotel, generally. You're absolutely right, Helen, the one time I was invited to an event, to see an exhibition abroad, I also felt I had total freedom to write what I wanted. But on the other hand, I also listened to colleagues who traveled to the Biennale de Lyon, for example, and they got a whole culinary experience, not just access to the art. I didn't see the same exhibition as the colleague who went there for Le Temps, for example, a few years ago. I think it's better sometimes to resist the PR.

HL: I think the risk is higher in travel journalism and in automotive journalism, but not so much in our field.

AR: It's like going to any exhibition preview – you don't, for example, have the same experience as the visitor who comes later and is squeezed in among too many other viewers. Helen and Samuel, do you get reader responses?

HL: I don't chat with my readers. I read the comments, and sometimes if I write a portrait of an artist someone writes me directly. Sometimes readers complain that too much taxpayers' money is spent on culture. I don't take this too seriously.

SS: I get feedback too, on social media and sometimes in the form of letters, or I hear from my family. And at work when we do briefings, we give each other feedback.

HL: I think that's important and I miss it as a freelance journalist. It's enriching to have regular feedback from your colleagues.

AR: Can we talk about your respective geographic perspectives – does the Röstigraben feel like a big divide, or is it more permeable these days?

HL: Because I write for the Bieler Tagblatt I am always jumping across the Röstigraben. I just wrote a portrait of Augustin Rebetez, an artist from the French-speaking Jura, because the Bern-based Sehnerv Association awarded him its media art prize. In 20 minutes, I am in Fribourg and what is happening in the Romandy is very interesting.

SS: I live in Lausanne, not in Geneva and it's a huge difference, Swiss-wise. People from Geneva never go to Switzerland. Most of them don't even have a half-fare travelcard of the Swiss Railways. From Lausanne we at least travel to Bern and Zurich and Basel. But it's true that I don't do so enough.

AR: Do you have a perspective on art criticism on the other side?

HL: I wouldn't say I have a complete overview.

SS: It's always so different when you read in another language. But I sometimes have the same feeling about other critics here in Romandy. In the beginning when I was comparing our two articles on the same exhibition, I would be so impressed, I thought I could never write the same way. And now actually I don't want to. It's great, but it's a different kind of writing. I really have the same impression in German or English, it's not just a question of Switzerland. In French, people may be getting to the point more quickly.

MG: My next suburb is Berlin. I try to see as much as possible here – as well as in Chur, Geneva and Basel – but, unfortunately, I don't have time for all of it.

AR: With that in mind, which publications, newspapers or journals do you go to for art criticism?

HL: I like Monopol, I think they cover new tendencies in an attractive way. Editor in chief Elke Buhr talks about interesting subjects, taking a position and defending it. I read Kunstbulletin to know what is going on.

SS: For Switzerland definitely Kunstbulletin for an overview. But some of the articles are written before the shows open, which is problematic in terms of critique.

MG: My hero was Samuel Herzog, but he's not writing for the NZZ anymore. Monopol is my tabloid, Texte zur Kunst and Art Monthly for the serious stuff. Then followed by all the online publications like artnet and frieze and The Guardian.

AR: You said earlier that art criticism is too close to the art system when the critic is embedded in this economy of trips and publicity. But with a lack of reviews, are art makers missing out on a service that criticism should deliver? Survey articles are sweeping and non-specific, so art criticism has stepped away from the mechanics of how things are made and what is happening specifically, locally. Does this strike a chord with you?

MG: They don't really need us. There is no intrinsic interest in the field of art. The reviews no longer have real value, only marginal symbolic value, an add-on in the public relation game. We're now on the generational cusp, it's time for the classical post-war cultural scene to die and we're in the line of fire. I don't think much is coming after this. They need us for PR, for their portfolio, but nobody reads it. It's just adds cachet.

AR: But that is to suggest that the art market is all there is.

MG: Of course, the art market is not the only field where art is produced. It is a bubble in itself, of artists, dealers, curators, collectors and patrons. But the boundaries to other events,

from Art and the Venice Biennale to festivals and museums and theatres, are blurry. Here, too, there is a dependency on foundations and state funding institutions, not only on the part of the artists.

AR: But if you as journalists can resist the encouragement of PR professionals to write a certain way, artists and curators can also resist the market.

MG: I am convinced that it is an illusion that a curator, an artist or an art critic can escape the market. We are part of the system. The only question is whether we allow ourselves to be manipulated, appropriated and put into its service.

SS: So what you are saying is that galleries no longer believe the critic's opinion to be important for building an artist's career?

MG: It's important to them that there is a document, a text that may not be read by anyone at that moment, but it's a trace, a memory left behind that you can link to. I have been writing for 40 years now. I'm satisfied when I get paid for it, even if it has always been poorly paid. But I enjoy writing and I do it for some benefit - my engagement with art has been gaining depth and I'm happy to share it with others. As Helen said, ours is not the time of Ruskin when an art critic could elevate an artist and his work through their writing. But I think we can help give others a better understanding of contemporary performances and artworks.

HL: But that's not only a negative development. It also has its positive sides. Art criticism has become more democratic. It's not just a few critics who can decide whether something is of interest or not – the audience can contradict them. We are no longer gods. It's a good thing that an artist can put his or her work on Instagram and people can see it and enjoy it. It's also an opportunity for the artists.

AR: Now we've talked for an hour and I have no doubt about your opinion, Max, that the future is bleak! Helen and Samuel, your outlook seems to be more positive? Do you feel that critics should be innovating?

HL: I don't think we can be optimistic, because it's a fact that there are fewer locations for our texts. But perhaps I am more optimistic than Max about our role. I think we are still needed. We are mediators. I also feel there isn't enough space given to culture, it's the first thing that is cut when news outlets have to save money. I don't think the audience wants that; I think there's a great interest in art. If we can write about art in an interesting way, people will enjoy reading it.

SS: I think the back and forth that I observe here in Romandy will continue for some time. I'm not sure criticism is going to disappear. We still need and want reviews. Of course we need innovators, but haven't we always been innovating over the past 20 years? It's a way of not getting bored; we have varied the way we talk about exhibitions, and it's difficult to say, but I'm not too pessimistic. Max is right that our role has definitely changed in relation to galleries; some gallerists have mixed feelings about my writing as it's seen as left-leaning, coming from *Le Courrier*, so they don't promote the articles too much. I really write for our readers.

HL: We shouldn't underestimate our readers.

[1] [[b-n-l/critics-conversation-1/pdf#a1](#)] «stell dir vor, es gibt kultur, aber niemand weiss davon» (Imagine there's culture and no one knows about it). Panel discussion on the future of

cultural journalism, featuring Susanne Kübler (Arts Editor, Tages-Anzeiger), Simone Meier (Arts Editor, Watson, and writer), Peer Teuwsen (Chief Arts Editor, NZZ am Sonntag) and Heinrich Weingartner (independent arts journalist, founder of the online magazine kultz). Moderated by Monika Schärer.

<https://www.theaterneumarkt.ch/2020/11/13/podium-kulturjournalismus/>

[<https://www.theaterneumarkt.ch/2020/11/13/podium-kulturjournalismus/>]

[2] [[/critics-conversation-1/pdf#b1](#)] <https://zackbum.ch/2020/12/02/daniele-muscionico-erhielt-kuendigung/> [%20<https://zackbum.ch/2020/12/02/daniele-muscionico-erhielt-kuendigung/>]

[3] [[/critics-conversation-1/pdf#c1](#)] <https://www.thalia-theater.de/stueck/faust-i--ii-2011>
[<https://www.thalia-theater.de/stueck/faust-i--ii-2011>]

MAX GLAUNER

Max Glauner is cultural journalist and lecturer at the ZHdK. His work and research interests include semiotics of culture, hybrid performance practices, participation as an artistic strategy and the collaborative in the arts. He writes regularly on theater, performance and visual arts for various publications, including the *Tagesspiegel*, *Der Freitag*, [Republik.ch](#) [<http://www.republik.ch>], *Artforum*, *Kunstforum International* and *Kunst Bulletin*. He lives in Zurich and Berlin.

HELEN LAGGER

Helen Lager studied art history, journalism and German literature in Freiburg and Paris. She writes for a number of publications, including the *Berner Kulturagenda*, *Berner Zeitung*, *Bieler Tagblatt* and *HKB-Zeitung*. She is co-founder and author of the blog «Die Kultussen» (2011–2014).

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