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A Plea for Mythological, Inter-ligent and Dividual Art Criticsm

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In digitized, interconnected, post- and trans-human times, judgment becomes ‹justment.› Once online, criticism diffuses into the channels of the social networks, it is commented on, ironized, parodied, corrected. Individual criticism has turned into dividual criticism. A response to Engaged Art Criticism — 7 Propositions by Ines Kleesattel and Pablo Müller.

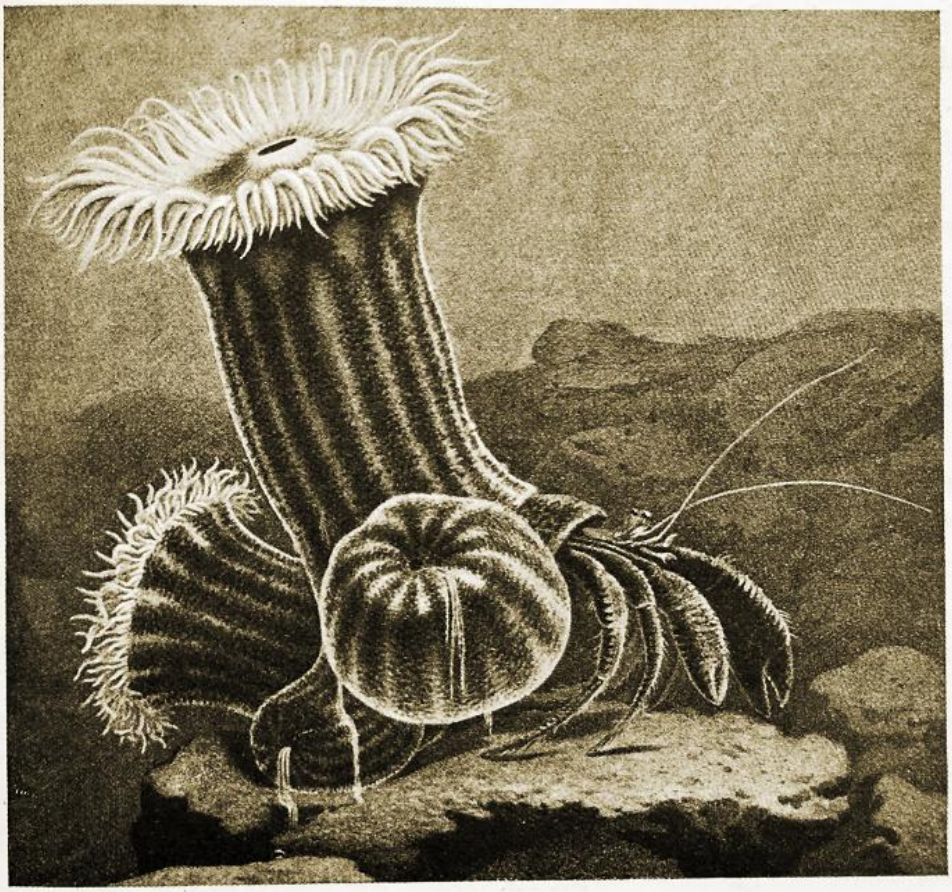


Fig. 113. Einsiedlerkrebs mit einer Seerose (Sagartia parasitica).

Myth

At the beginning of this essay I can't help but polemicize a bit against the concept that is subject to negotiation here. In a purely lexical sense ‹engaged› is great and correct, yet from a socio-linguistic perspective the term carries certain connotations that make me uncomfortable. Engaged art criticism, to me, sounds somewhat officious, somewhat pushy, a bit like 1990s New Labour politics: ‹engaged art.› It is also reminiscent of report card jargon: «your child is a thoroughly engaged student» (which usually implies that he or she is trying hard, but the results are not where they're supposed to be). After all, it is often just a small step from ‹engaged› to ‹embedded.› Consequently, I would argue: independent criticism, traditionally the sidekick of the autonomous individual, may be a phantasm (like the latter), but engaged art criticism might run the risk of being absorbed by a contemporary trend that the philosopher Gerald Raunig, to whom I will come back again later, describes as follows in his book Dividuum: «The becoming-machinic of capitalism implies a process of the increasing obligation and self-obligation of the parts to participate. This imperative of involvement, of engagement and self-activation marks the entanglements and comprehensive valorizations in machinic capitalism, without clear boundaries between reception and production.»[1]

It is a truism that art criticism is not independent, that there basically is no actually existing outside, that each human being is a Homo mundanus (Wolfgang Welsch), a being in many ways interwoven with the world surrounding it. Yet this also means that there is no inside, which makes the whole discussion kind of irrelevant. The question whether independent criticism exists is de facto not at all that important. What is important is that criticism expresses a will to independence and thus sets things in motion. I would like to call this will a mythological will.

In his book The Presence of Myth, the Polish philosopher Leszek Ko?akowski interpreted myths as stories that teach what should constitute a value. They are essential for the existence of all human societies, he said. The mythical experience relativizes all possible experience and references realities that do not form a logical bond with the verbal description of reality. According to Ko?akowski, myths create a paradigm removed from real coming into being that one can emulate in real coming into being.[2] Hence there is no freedom in the romantic sense, of course, if only because of our biological dependencies. But, perhaps, we should still want to be free — everything else would result in defeatism. In other words, the myth of independence and autonomy opens up a space of possibility that, admittedly, is never entirely fulfilled, but that, as an intermediate space, at least drives a wedge between us and factuality.

Inter-ligence

Apropos intermediate space: if it wouldn't sound so ‹educated middle-class› and at once innocuous and arrogant, I personally would prefer intelligent art criticism, ‹intelligent› in the sense of ‹inter-legere›: a criticism that reads between the lines, that explores and surveys interstices, because such criticism would naturally, indeed inevitably, look beyond the field of art, as stated in the seven propositions; or better still, it would find that the field of art consistently rises above itself — or has risen above itself — anyway.

Ever since the «explosion of aesthetics» (Gianni Vattimo) in the twentieth century, the field of art is inherently trans-artistic, from Kurt Schwitters' horseshoe-incorporating Merz pictures and Andy Warhol's Business Art or Party-as-Art to present-day Artistic Research, Relational Aesthetics or «art without artists» (Anton Vidokle) and «artists without art» (Brad Troemel). Interdisciplinarity, too, was the rule rather than the exception for long periods of the history of

art — just think of the Renaissance or the Arts-and-Crafts movement. Therefore criticism should itself be ‹inter› and ‹trans,› as it refers to trans- and inter-phenomena, especially with a view to contemporary, biennial-qualified, scholarship-conform or activist art. In other words, a critic who writes about Vito Acconci's early work without considering the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s is not really writing about Acconci's early work. And someone who writes about Concrete Art without considering its influence on company logos is not really writing about Concrete Art.

If we don't pretend to be blind, deaf, dumb or stupid, we cannot but register what the position paper calls «dialogue, debate and contradiction» in the field of art. Imperative demands such as «criticism must be solidary» or «criticism must be disputatious» are unnecessary if criticism is just intelligent, or more specifically: ‹intelligence› should really be called ‹inter-ligence› and intellectuals ‹inter-lectuals›.

Dividuum

Another issue from the seven propositions concerns the involvement of laymen or, as the authors put it, «a wider public». In this regard I think we can lean back reassured and let the new media do their work. It is not up to us, the critics, to extend our hand to the people in the manner of British cultural policy makers and devote ourselves to community building. This is something the machines, media and algorithms will take care of by themselves for us. As Marshall McLuhan wrote in 1967: «The medium, or process, of our time — electric technology — is reshaping and restructuring patterns of social interdependence and every aspect of our personal lives. It is forcing us to reconsider and re-evaluate practically every thought, every action, and every institution formerly taken for granted. Everything is changing — you, your family, your neighborhood, your education, your job, your government, your relation to ‹the others.› And they're changing dramatically.»[3]

Especially today, McLuhan's skill at diagnosing the present appears beyond dispute. As a result of digitization and the social networks, art criticism has, not necessarily by art critics' design, taken on new forms and functions. When I published an article ten, fifteen years ago, the highest of feedback feelings was an angry letter to the editor, sometimes also a complimentary one or a call from an acquaintance. Today, however, my articles automatically — without my doing and without my direct consent — turn into co-productions the moment they're online. They are broken down into their individual components, quoted here and there — ideally, that is: they are often simply ignored, of course —, taken out of context and recontextualized. But more than anything, provided the respective publication venue allows it, they are commented on.

As opposed to some of my colleagues, who complain above all about rhetorical low blows, verbal abuse and disinhibition on the net, I consider the comment function a real gain for criticism. It makes art criticism better, especially when I publish it in a venue such as the newspaper Die Zeit, where it is possible to comment after online activation (many highbrow art magazines do not have this function or outsource it to their Facebook pages). Ever since the introduction of comment functions, share buttons and tweeting options I no longer see my texts as finished works, but rather as ‹con-texts› over which I as author, though not dead, have no full control. In the invectives, additions, corrections by those obscure readers, whom I have never met in person, I recognize a form of writing and, in particular, of criticizing that I would like to describe not as communitarian, not as collaborative, but rather, following Raunig, as dividual writing.

In classical art criticism, the notion of the autonomous individual plays an important role, as mentioned earlier: an individual passed a judgment to the best of his or her knowledge and belief and communicated it to an ideally mature audience that, at best, could respond to it by means of letters to the editors. In digitized, interconnected, post- and trans-human times judgment has become ‹justment.› Once online, criticism is shared, chopped up and re-contextualized. An important factor here is that we cannot pick one's co-authors, that one has no control over them. One's writing is being continued. One could go so far and say that Derrida's much-cited primary text is de facto lost in these cases — the criticism, the judgment, the argument no longer exists separate from the responses and inscriptions of others; instead, they share a common, albeit virtual space and constitute a dialectic, processual structure. Temporality returns to the texts; the judgment no longer seems carved in stone; rather, it resembles a quarry from which material is constantly carried off for extension buildings or competing structures. I therefore predict that in the future individual critics will less than ever set the tone and, instead, make themselves heard together with the choir of comments, clicks and likes. Jerry Saltz, the constant tweeter and marathon blogger of New York magazine, is a good example of this: initially at home in the individual age, he is now an intensely hyped star of the dividuals. To use a non-art example: for the post-war American civil rights movement the most important thing was to reach a small number of key media and, for instance, make it onto the cover of Time magazine. With that, the criticism had become effective. Today, one has to be simultaneously present on myriad channels; one has to dividuate (be dividuated) or, rather, expose oneself to the dividual. That is, one doesn't have to, of course; in most cases it happens anyway.

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[1] Raunig, Gerald. *Dividuum. Machinic Capitalism and Molecular Revolution.* Cambridge, MA: Transversal Texts, 2015, 1t.

[2] Ko?akowski, Leszek, *The Presence of Myth.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

[3] McLuhan, Marshall and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Message.* New York: Random House, 1967.

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