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Engaged Art Criticism

7 Propositions

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Art has never been written about as much as it is today in daily newspapers, international journals and on online platforms. At the same time, commentators have for quite some time now identified a sustained crisis of art criticism. In order to not give the last word to diagnoses of the end of art criticism, Pablo Müller and Ines Kleesattel outline possibilities of and approaches to an art critical practice today.



1. No End in Sight Yet

Since the year 2000, commentators in arts pages and journals have emphatically identified a crisis of art criticism. The loudest accusations in this recurrent murmur claim that present-day art criticism is simply not critical enough. It is argued that neutral meandering is favored over polemic commentary and that hardly anyone dares to pass judgment anymore (James Elkins);[1] contemporary art criticism is said to have degenerated into a simulation of profundity and ritualized sham debates (Christian Demand);[2] according to another argument, a non-specific relativism is taking hold in this post-critical condition (Hal Foster).[3] Historically, this critique of art criticism is by no means new and in view of institutional and economic entanglements it is also by all means justified. Yet exclusively diagnosing that it is insufficiently critical or that real criticism no longer exists is anything but productive.

The ineffectiveness and impotence of art criticism has been repeatedly pointed out as well. According to Benjamin Buchloh and Rosalind Krauss, art nowadays is primarily shaped by the art market and institutional interests, with the result that regular presence at established institutions suffices to validate artistic work. Art critical assessment is said to no longer play a role in this process.[4] According to Stefan Germer, institutional selection has superseded critical judgment;[5] criticism is merely an amplifier of art world bustle. Following Luc Boltanski and Éve Chiapello, art criticism cannot escape the current all-embracing capitalistic commercialization anyhow.[6] Art criticism, the argument goes, solely serves the social spectacle[7] and any criticism, no matter how radical, can ultimately be understood as incorporated capital.[8]

This view, which tends to be fatalistic and, indeed, deterministic, deduces an alleged impotence of criticism from its embeddedness in society, rather than, more obviously, from the condition of the possibility of change. Actual shifts of power (expansion of the institutional apparatus, expanded zones of commercialization, an invigorated art market…) are not necessarily indicative of an end of political, that is, critical, emancipatory potentials. Because art criticism operates in the midst of the existing power structure — a structure it, in fact, also helps (re-)producing —, it is capable of perspective shifts and transformative intervention.

In our opinion, moments of successful and appropriate criticism by all means exist. Think, for instance, of the London-based magazine Mute. Mute discusses cultural production with regard to current social and technological developments (digitization, bio-politics, internet art, radical democracy) and decidedly practices discursive participation. Another example is the Les Complices art space in Zürich (2007–14). In its critical curatorial practice the space run by Andrea Thal challenged hegemonic forms of representation and stabilizing dispositifs in historical narratives, persistent identification mechanisms and gendered cultural practices. And an exchange such as the one between Claire Bishop, Liam Gillick and Nicolas Bourriaud about the notion of «relational aesthetics» also shows us[9] how alive and necessary criticism is today. Such existing and fertile approaches are often actively blanked out and marginalized in the critical discourse described above. This blanking out negates an — absolutely possible — productive use of the given scope and affirms a passive fatalistic perspective vis-à-vis seemingly all-encompassing commercialization.

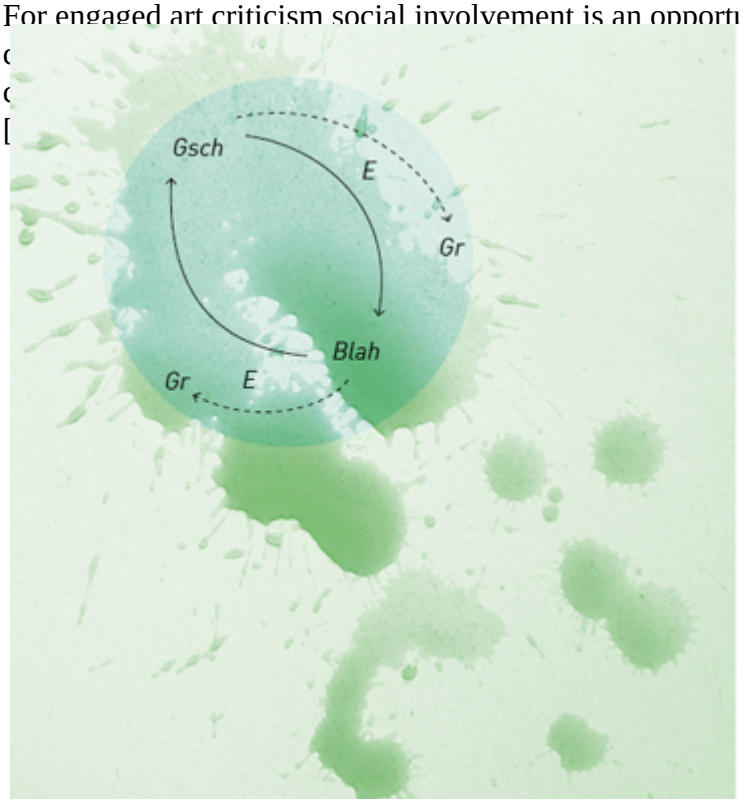
2. Being in the World with Criticism

There is no outside. Art and its critical reflection are embedded in social and political conditions and help produce these. Engaged art criticism by no means laments this fact.[10]

On the contrary: this very point of intersection is its particular concern. Socio-geo-historical localizations of art are included in its reflections and factored into the critical judgment. The meaning of an artwork can shift over time, depending on place and audience. A once bland work may suddenly gain topicality a few years later or in a different exhibition context. Engaged art criticism therefore develops its argumentation with regard to the specific constellation at the time in which artwork is produced, presented and received, rather than starting from universal, timeless criteria.

The issues engaged art criticism discusses in and along with art transcend the field of art and take up ongoing socio-political debates. In this sense, engaged art criticism understands art and its field in socio-political terms; this means that under certain circumstances it can become an explicitly political endeavor.

For engaged art criticism social involvement is an opportunity for exchange, alignment and
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Blah = Blahblahblah
E = Engagement
Gr = Gruppierung
Gsch = Geschwätz

4) Leere / Tümpel

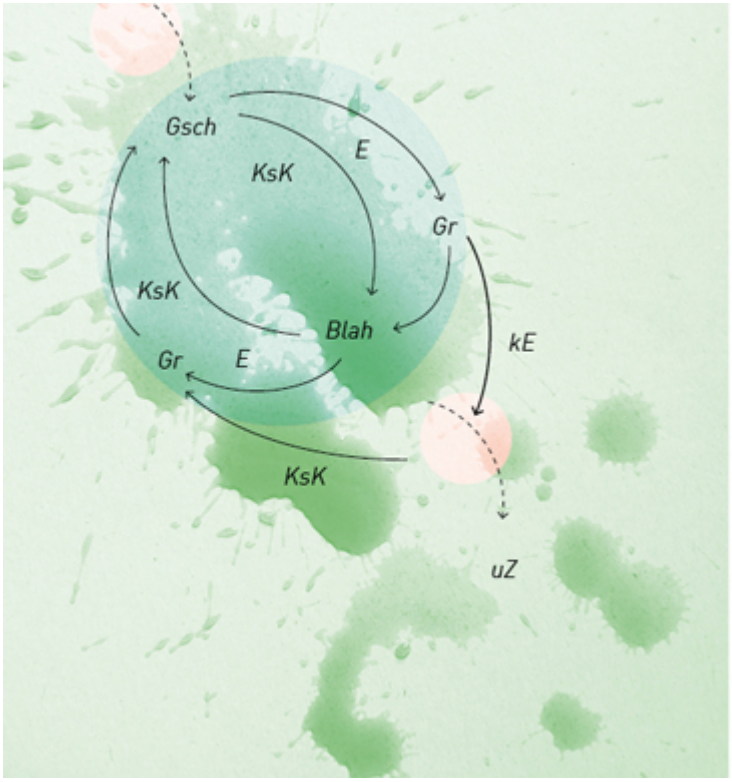
3. Institutional Critique

Engaged art criticism does not fall for the phantasm of being independent. It reflects, deliberates and negotiates its own place within art system processes and other webs of relationships. It reflects not just on the artworks, projects and exhibitions discussed, but also on itself as being involved in hegemonic structures und interest-based connections. In this sense engaged art criticism is a genuinely institution-critical endeavor.

It is explicitly concerned with appropriately addressing its own never impartial positioning within the field of art and vis-à-vis the subject discussed. This pertains to content-related, pragmatic, political and personal interests — that is, its professional standards and normative premises — as well as to its assignment situation, working conditions and financial or other dependencies. Its premises, (production) conditions and concerns thus make it as transparent

as possible.

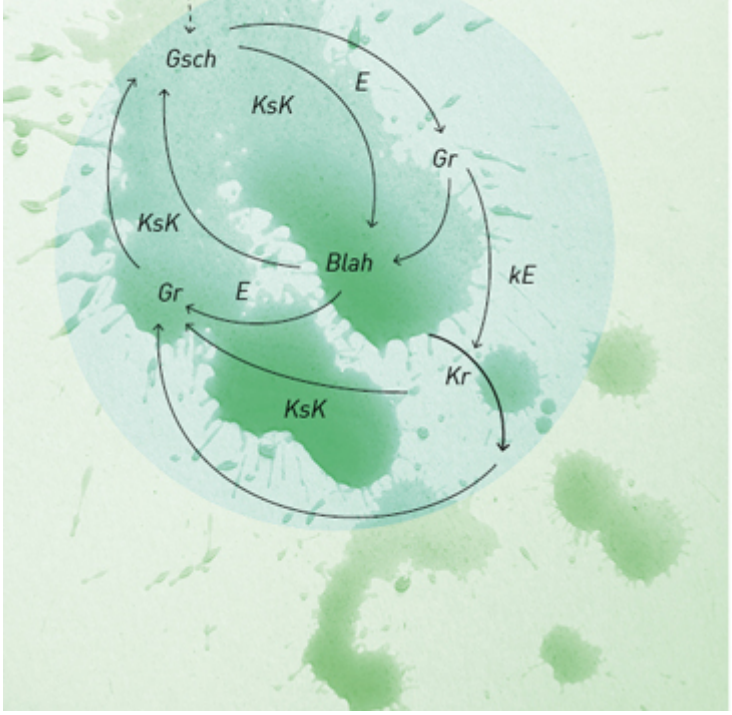
The following aspects, for example, can become important for engaged art criticism with regard to the discussed artworks and exhibitions: tax savings, increases in value, developments and shifts in the art world, cultural-political circumstances, uncertain working conditions, positioning of the discipline, ongoing debates about concepts such as ‹political art›, ‹global art› and ‹contemporary art› as well as the situation in educational institutions (some keywords in this context would be Bologna, artistic research or the post-colonial expansion of European and Northern American curricula and formats). In the process it can actually learn a great deal from the research-based approaches of the tradition of artistic institutional critique. In terms of their relentlessness and analytical acuteness as well as their unorthodox objects of study these approaches are an important source of inspiration for institution-critical art criticism.



Blah = Blahblahblah
E = Engagement
Gr = Gruppierung
Gsch = Geschwätz
kE = kollektives Engagement
KsK = Kampf um symbolisches Kapital
uZ = utopische Zukunft

1) Bewegung

Hence there is no need to neglect aspects specific to art and aesthetics. On the contrary: it cannot be a matter of playing off the institution-critical analysis of structural conditions against aesthetic experience. Rather, it is essential that the interrelationships between the two be perceived. The same applies to problematizing false assertions of autonomy, on the one hand, and defending nonetheless existing demands for autonomy, on the other. Engaged, institution-critical art criticism does not confine itself to pointing out dependencies, profitable networks and secret alliances. It always aims to point to possible ways out and alternatives, rather than resignedly persist in a farewell to any artistic autonomy and criticism. It is always aiming for problematizing contextualization and for exploring possible free scopes for development. Only in this way it can claim an emancipatory and not merely field-internal relevance for itself; only in this way it can highlight an expanded (and at times possibly underestimated) critical potential of art based on specific works — a potential that can serve as a starting point for a wide range of participants.



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2) Kritik als Farce / Füllmasse

4. A Theory of Criticality

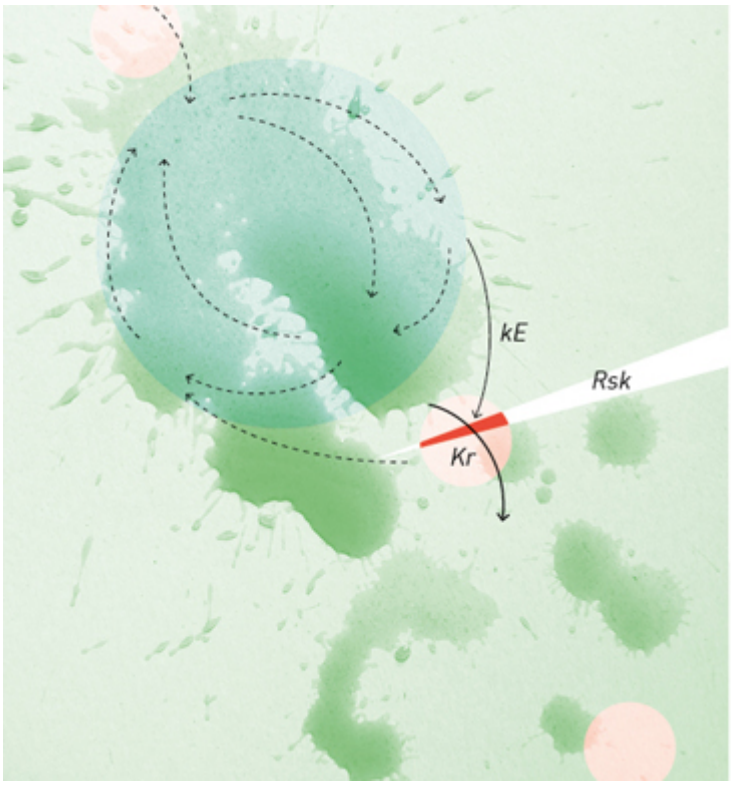
Engaged art criticism helps differentiating the much-debated, disputed “criticality” of art that is often just as rashly claimed as it is rejected. It associates itself neither with the hype of ‹critical art› nor with generalizing dismissals of criticism, which assume that art criticism is invariably coopted as a profitable strategy by neoliberalism and therefore in its entiretyunusable for emancipatory causes (Luc Boltanski and Éve Chiapello).[12] In addition to case-specifically discussing how and where allegedly critical art remains entangled in hegemonic interests and in what form and context it is a place of alternatives and resistances, engaged art criticism asks the basic question: what does criticism mean at all — in art and beyond? What forms of criticism do we know and want? In what way, when and where does which (artistic and otherwise) criticism become political?

We understand successful and appropriate criticality as a project that is being worked on as much by art criticism as it is by art. The questions that interest us are: what current forms of criticism exist; what is missing; what is productive; what could be expanded? To what extent do divisions of labor between production and reception make sense; where do art criticism and artist’s criticism converge; and why is it important to still cleave to differences between the two?

Also, engaged art criticism draws on various theoretical and empirical analyses of the ways in which social conditions affect and shift the possibilities of criticism. In other words, art criticism is connected to other forms and fields of criticism.

What constitutes criticality is not a foregone conclusion for engaged art criticism. Rather, is has to be specifically determined over and over in the course of its individual analyses: what is currently due; what has priority and relevance here and now? Engaged art criticism is, in this sense, a kind of policy of truth — that is, it is a partial practice that champions underestimated, overlooked and jeopardized possibilities. We propose that it aligns itself with Walter Benjamin’s demand that any criticism must at the same time be a theoretical reflection on its premises[13], and that it builds on Foucault’s method of always keeping an eye on dominant forms of power, while at the same time looking for forms of opposition in their

midst that are working on «not [being] governed like that.»[14] In a given case such resistances can be identified in a context- and situation-specific way. Thus a theory of criticality, to us, does not mean a generalization, but rather a concretion.



kE = kollektives Engagement
Rsk = Risiko, Verlust, Blamage
Kr = Kritik

3a) Kritik als Umkrempelung

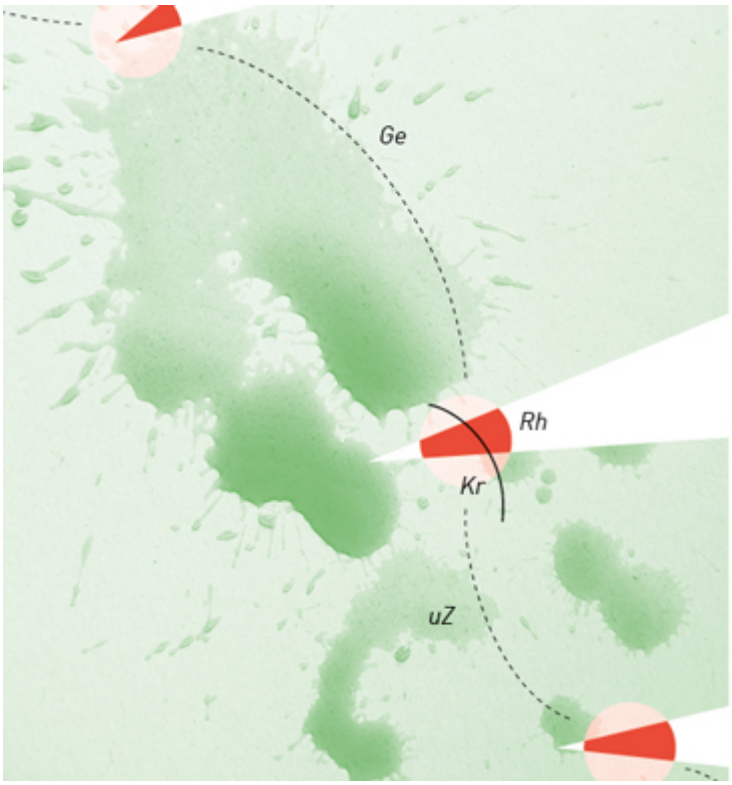
5. Specific Starting Points, Detached Judgment and Engaged Advocacy

Traditionally, one of the tasks of art criticism is to judge art based on expert knowledge. The discussed artwork is found to be good and therefore significant or, alternatively, bad and therefore insignificant. This task can be seen in direct relation to demands following from commercialization. Nowadays this connection between value judgment and art market manifests itself in ‹must-sees›, ‹best of› ratings and ‹like› functions.

Engaged art criticism is not a simple value judgment. It comments, differentiates and allows for contradictory movements within. The starting point of criticism is a specific observation. Based on this observation, an argument is put forward and the particular critical assessment is verifiable. Such nuanced writing (and speaking) about art is not readily quantifiable, nor can it be easily integrated into a rating logic.

Yet this differentiated approach notwithstanding, engaged art criticism does judge and does take a stance. It commits, affirms, rejects. This is, however, done in each specific individual case and based on each specific situation of work and world. It does not once and for all side with a particular artist, nor does it consider championing a particular artistic trend its ultimate purpose.

Engaged art criticism gets involved with the artworks. It responds to each individual case without being in any way committed. The artwork does something to the critic who allows the artwork to affect him or her and who may sometimes become lost in a specific situation. Yet engaged art criticism does not abstain from reflective detachment. For engaged art criticism the specific and the general are by all means interlinked.



Rh = Ruhe, Ereignis
Ge = Gedächtnis, Erinnerung
Kr = Kritik
uZ = utopische Zukunft

3b) Interrevolutionäre Zeit

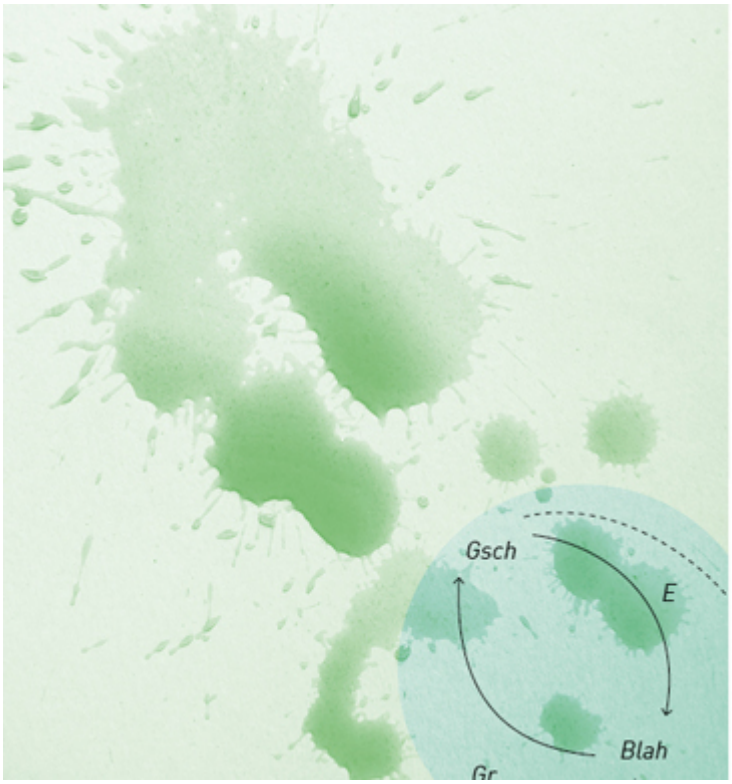
6. Heterogeneous and Disputatious

Dialogue, debate and contradiction receive particular emphasis in engaged art criticism. It promotes formats besides the common monologic authorial form. These could be multiple reviews of an exhibition, an article penned by multiple authors, round table discussions, comments, letters to the editor, two authors expressing conflicting views on a subject. Various formats of exchange are intended to actively involve the so-called layman. Such an engaged perspective relies on heterogeneity, rather than on an elite circle of art connoisseurs. Different people can, each from their own specific background, contribute to an expanding reading and introduce questions that are not available to specialists. In this sense engaged art criticism, loath to be mere academic specialist discourse, aims at involving a wider public.

At the same time we obviously will have to resist educated middle-class premeditations and know-all assumptions. And we have to ask ourselves: to what extent are we at all able to allow real heterogeneity? And what would drive those who are not already part of the field of art to enter into an exchange with us?

As uncertain as this endeavor may be, this is what we are convinced of:

an artwork can be accessed and discussed in greater complexity in a collaborative and multi-perspectival manner than from a singular position. Engaged art criticism constitutes an intersubjective practice that examines artworks both in a collaborative/solidary and in a disputatious/unsettling manner.



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4) Desaster / Leere

7. An Emancipatory Communication Practice, Too

Art criticism is accused of often being merely descriptive anymore today. But we feel that its descriptive function really does play an important role. Description clarifies the subject at issue; it focuses on its center, identifies its relevance and contextualizes it. It can highlight and record what is easily overlooked. Hence the boundaries between description, analysis and evaluation are usually blurred and resist being drawn clearly. Besides, not every reader has seen the exhibition in question and not everyone has the background knowledge needed for an understanding. Subjects of discussion often become accessible to outsiders only through descriptions and additional information.

The inclusive, anti-elitist and communicative aspect is significant for engaged art criticism, as it addresses a heterogeneous public. Even so, it must ask itself how it can make available and share knowledge without appearing authoritarian and disempowering.

Two aspects seem particularly important to us in this context: the function of language and acknowledging other forms of knowledge on equal terms.

Text invariably creates context. Therefore a self-conscious approach to language is essential for engaged art criticism. Yet even when assumption-free speaking and writing is impossible, the critic must always be aware that concepts have a history and invariably carry intended as well as unintended connotations with them; that each jargon produces inclusions and exclusions; and that not everything that sounds good benefits critical engagement.

Because engaged art criticism aims to be an empowering (pedagogically) communicative effort and contribute to a diversified critical public, it also asks how it can promote formats of collaborative description, questioning and contextualization. A decisive presupposition for the collaborative (or disputatious) discussion with a heterogeneous public is that there is no unknowing public, but, rather, heterogeneous starting points and forms of knowledge. Engaged art criticism therefore subscribes to the notion proposed by Antonio Gramsci, Walter Benjamin, Stuart Hall and Roger Behrens that every human being is a specialist and that

superficial knowledge of all kind must be made productive.

This essay is a revised version of a lecture presented at the conference *Engagiertes vermitteln. Kunstpädagogik, Kunstkritik, Kunstvermittlung* at the Lucerne School of Art and Design. The conference was organized by the school's Art, Design & the Public Sphere research group in cooperation with the Master of Arts in Fine Arts and supported by AICA – Association internationale des critiques d'art: Section suisse.

The imagery is by Annatina Caprez.

[1] James Elkins, for instance, writes in 2004 collection of essays titled What Happened to Art Criticism?: «Art criticism was once passionate, polemical and judgmental: now critics are more often interested in ambiguity, neutrality, and nuanced description.» James Elkins, What Happened to Art Criticism? (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004).

[2] Christian Demand, Die Beschämung der Philister. Wie die Kunst sich der Kritik entledigte (Springe: Zu Klampen Verlag, 2003), pp. 11 and 262.

[3] Hal Foster, «Post-Critical.» October 139 (2012), pp. 3–8.

[4] George Baker, Rosalind Krauss, Benjamin Buchloh, Andrea Fraser, David Joselit, James Meyer, Robert Storr, Hal Foster, John Miller and Helen Molesworth. «Round Table. The Present Conditions of Art Criticism.» October 100 (2002), pp. 201–228, here p. 202.

[5] Stefan Germer, «Wie finde ich mich aus diesem Labyrinth? Über die Notwenigkeit und Unmöglichkeit von Kriterien zur Beurteilung zeitgenössischer Kunst.» In Germeriana. Unveröffentlichte oder übersetzte Schriften von Stefan Germer zur zeitgenössischen und modernen Kunst, ed. by Julia Bernard (Cologne: Oktagon, 1999), pp. 233–44, here p. 238.

[6] Luc Boltanski and Éve Chiapello, Der neue Geist des Kapitalismus (Konstanz: UVK, 2003).

[7] Roger Behrens, «Kritik. Rettend wie rücksichtslos.» Kunstforum International 221 (2013), pp. 165–81.

[8] Helmut Draxler, «Der Habitus des Kritischen. Über die Grenzen der reflexiven Praxis.» In Nach Bourdieu. Visualität Kunst Politik, ed. by Beatrice von Bismarck, Therese Kaufmann and Ulf Wuggenig (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2008), pp. 265–73.

[9] Nicolas Bourriaud, Relational Aesthetics (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2002); Claire Bishop, «Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics.» October 110 (2004), pp. 51–79; Liam Gillick and Claire Bishop, «Letters and Responses.» October 115 (2006), pp. 95–107.

[10] The term ‹engaged› is a makeshift construct for us and a reflection of lacking alternatives. What we find interesting about this term (as opposed to ‹critical›) is its insistence on social involvement and at the same time the emphatic aspiration towards a concrete, political practice. Furthermore, engagement is not committed solely to reflective reasoning, but incorporates spontaneous responses and affects as well. What we find problematic about the term is its currently prevalent neoliberal use. Nowadays, appeals compel every employee, freelancer and job seeker to be engagé, active and involved; in our spare time neighborhood associations and officially initiated participation projects call on us to voluntary engage ourselves socially; and companies document its praiseworthy contribution to social and ecological compensation in their commitment columns.

[11] Such a perspective is also championed by Jens Kastner. Jens Kastner, «Zur Kritik der Kritik der Kunstkritik. Feld- und hegemonietheoretische Einwände.» In Kunst der Kritik, ed. by Birgit Mennel, Stefan Nowotny and Gerald Raunig (Vienna/Berlin: Turia + Kant, 2010), pp. 125–47.

[12] Boltanski and Chiapello 2003 (see n. 7).

[13] Cf. Walter Benjamin, «Announcement of the Journal Angelus Novus.» In idem. Selected Writings, vol. I (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 292–96; Walter Benjamin, «Memorandum zu der Zeitschrift ‹Krisis und Kritik›.» In idem, Gesammelte Schriften, vol. VI, pp. 619–21.

[14] Michel Foucault, «What is Critique?» in James Schmidt (ed.), What Is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Questions and Twentieth-Century Answers (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p. 28.

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Pablo Müller ist Kunsthistoriker und Kunstkritiker. Seine Artikel erschienen unter anderem in Kunstbulletin, Neue Zürcher Zeitung, Die Wochenzeitung, Jungle World. Nach längeren Aufenthalten in Berlin und New York arbeitet er seit 2014 in der Forschung an der Hochschule Luzern – Design & Kunst und promoviert an der Universität Zürich. Er ist Mitherausgeber von Brand-New-Life.