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From the Margins

For Art Criticism from Offstage

Edith Krebs

In the classic (print) media, art criticism is something hardly practiced anymore. This is why a retreat into specialist art magazines, blogs and online publications offers itself as an alternative. From the margins it is possible to set the canon into motion and shift it in the long term. A response to *Engaged Art Criticism — 7 Propositions* by Ines Kleesattel and Pablo Müller.



Concerning 1. No End in Sight Yet:

In its 25-year anniversary issue titled *The Canon*, the editorial team of *Texte zur Kunst* notes that by now the magazine itself ranks «among the institutions of canonization.» Around 1990, theoretical approaches of the kind championed by the *Texte zur Kunst* were still rare, at least in the German-speaking world. «Canon» is understood here as the «site of a lively art-critical debate» which is «backed up with always current value judgments.» Still, it is said to be possible to shift aspects of the respective hegemonic understanding and, in doing so, challenge its narratives and criteria. Examples of «the dynamic between criticism and context of tradition» explicitly highlighted are «feminist or post-colonial canon criticism,» that is, positions of marginalized segments of the population.[1]

With this self-positioning, Texte zur Kunst makes an important case for art criticism from the margins; the magazine itself, after all, has worked its way from the periphery to the center with its positions. Counter-hegemonic initiatives, especially when supported by a group or a movement, can have more of an impact over time than is generally assumed.

Another example of such a position should be mentioned here: Okwui Enwezor, who in the 1980s started his campaign to raise the visibility of post-colonial art and, with this shift of hegemonic discourse, went on to become one of the most influential figures in the art world.

Texte zur Kunst was founded as a German-language publication in 1990 in Cologne; today it is published in German and English and based in Berlin. Enwezor, by contrast, is also geographically from a remote region — remote, that is, from the point of view of the western art world. In other words, he is ‹from the margins› in more than one way.

What is remarkable in Enwezor’s case is that, as artistic director of documenta 11 in Kassel, he was able to bring about a hegemonic shift within an institution, albeit one that had been marked out by his predecessor, Catherine David. For previously the focus of all editions of this major exhibition founded in 1955 had invariably been on the art of the West, in spite of its aspiration, postulated from the outset, to be a platform of ‹world art.›

Concerning 2. Being in the World with Criticism:

No matter whether a protagonist situates him or herself in the center or at the periphery of the art world: there is no ‹outside.› Like all social systems, the art system is pervaded by power relations. Those at the margins usually have less power than those in the center. But the center (or the canon) can be set into motion — not single-handedly, but together with many allies. The positions within a system are, in other words, never fixed, but rather more or less volatile.

Such movements may be socio-political — just think of feminism or, in general, of the civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Without a feminist movement, feminist art is hardly conceivable, and the same is true of post-colonial art.

Despite the realization that there cannot be an ‹outside› — i.e., autonomy — critical objection from a position in the center is hard to imagine. Some independence is needed for relevant criticism. A person who curates an exhibition today, authors a catalogue essay tomorrow and from time to time writes an art review — such a person is so closely interwoven with the network of art that an autonomous assessment seems impossible (unless such a person would have already worked his or her way into the center, like Okwui Enwezor or Ai Weiwei).

Concerning 3. Institutional Critique:

An analysis of the power relations of the field is to be declared a requirement for art criticism that is socially oriented. In this regard, situating the artistic position one writes about is vital in this field: what interests does it cater to, what objectives does it pursue and which dependencies shape it?

Informational texts about an artwork, such as press releases or museum or gallery handouts, are often helpful in conducting such an analysis, because this is where such interests and dependencies frequently become apparent.

Of course, it also involves reflecting on one's own position (even if the latter is not always made explicit). In my capacity as editor of a leftist weekly this was usually unnecessary. Yet such obvious positioning also poses risks, for instance, in that a review can be readily dismissed as politically motivated. In such a case it is all the more important to convince with arguments. When a ‹leftist› art critic criticizes the work of a so-called ‹political artist,› his or her reservations about that artist's work must be all the more decidedly supported with reasons (otherwise acclaim from the opposite side is inevitable).

Concerning 4. A Theory of Criticality:

A person voicing criticism should not do so ‹instinctively,› but rather back up his or her criticism theoretically.

Studying theoretical texts helps to regularly rethink and possibly change one's own position — and also, if need be, to defend it externally. At the WOZ weekly, for instance, there was a rather intense debate in the early 2000s regarding a cultural-critical approach versus a pop-cultural one. You don't get very far in such a controversy without good arguments — and it wouldn't hurt to buttress them with big names from the field of theory.

Concerning 5. Specific Starting Points, Detached Judgment and Engaged Advocacy:

Engaged art criticism is not a simple value judgment; rather, it allows for contradictory movements within. It frequently happens that clear positioning is impossible, because diverging arguments are convincing. In such cases it may be very productive to discuss those uncertainties, this balancing in the text itself and thereby render it transparent. Quite often such texts are more interesting, for oneself and likely also for the readers, than a clear-cut position.

An example of such a text is the article about the vote on the so-called ‹Nagelhaus project› at Escher-Wyss-Platz in Zürich in 2010 that was nixed by a referendum initiated by the far-right Swiss People's Party. In the text, both proponents and opponents of the project had their say and the diverging arguments were elaborated in detail. And it is probably not a coincidence that this text, in particular, was repeatedly cited in the debate.

Concerning 6. Heterogeneous and Disputatious:

A dialogic or intersubjective form of art criticism can undoubtedly be very productive, both for the critics themselves and for the readers. However, a disadvantage of this dialogic mode

could be that the diverging arguments neutralize one another, leaving little friction. The dispute, which in the case of monologic approaches can take place between author and reader, is already conducted in the dialog.

Concerning 7. An Emancipatory Communication Practice, Too:

A description of the object to be critiqued must be regarded as a prerequisite of any view. Yet when it confines itself to describing and eschews further analysis, we arrive exactly at what is happening in the mainstream media today.

In-depth reflection becomes possible only by establishing a connection — between disciplines, between art and society. In this sense, art criticism is a «hybrid,» a kind of «savage thought»[1] that inter-relates a variety of disciplines. At the same time, this savage thought allows for an oppositional practice, a form of social critique.

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[1] Graw, Isabelle and Juliane Rebentisch, «Vorwort». *Texte zur Kunst* 100 (2015): 4–5.

[2] Krebs, Edith, «Dieses Haus steht im Auge des Hurrikans». *Die Wochenzeitung*, September 16, 2010, http://www.woz.ch/-21eb.

[3] Sonderegger, Ruth, «Praktische Theorien?». In *Bourdieu in Algerien*, ed. by Eipcp.net, November 2007. Accessed March 2, 2016, http://eipcp.net/transversal/0308/sonderegger/de [http://eipcp.net/transversal/0308/sonderegger/de].

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