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Magazin für Kunstkritik

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Taking a Seat at the Side Table of the Art Clique? I Would Prefer Not To.

Contemporary Art Criticism Struggles to Find a Sense of Purpose

Christian Saehrendt

The splendor and misery of art criticism has been a subject of discourses long enough. With their seven propositions for Engaged Art Criticism, Ines Kleesattel and Pablo Müller try to break out of this increasingly hermetic specialist discourse — a cause one can only support. However, the propositions read like the platform of a people's party that is meant to appeal to the broadest possible electorate.


ADAM SZYMCYK
WIR WOLLEN
NICHT ZUR
DEINER
DOCUMENTA 74



Disengaged artist. Better prophylactically turn down the Documenta. Photo: Daniel Chluba, 2014.

Many attractive ideas and upright concerns can be found in these propositions. Things one hardly contradict without appearing to be a snob or a querulous troll. Nevertheless, an attempt is made here to critique Engaged Art Criticism, beginning with a look at the predecessors of contemporary art criticism, at the historically evolved types of critics, these being, in ideal-typical terms:

The enlightener:He regards art criticism as a demonstration of a general power of judgment and individual autonomy. This type operates as an outside observer rather than as a representative of the art scene. Art criticism, to him, is a genre of a newly acquired freedom of speech and democratic public sphere, a training ground of the free debate of individuals. See, for instance, Denis Diderot.

The dandy: In this approach, art criticism is regarded as a means of expressing individual enjoyment, of effusive image cultivation and differentiation from the mainstream. One who epitomizes this is Oscar Wilde. In a way he, too, is an artist, a kind of dilettantish all-rounder. The dandy can play out his aesthetic dramatizations to their full extent — poet, critic, performer and fashion trendsetter — and, in doing so, always retrench to his status as the matchless dilettante.

The public’s advocate: He examines art for its benefit for the community: beauty, intellectual substance, entertainment value. This type translates the language of the artworks or the art

discourse into layman’s terms and is working towards empowering the lay public to form opinions of their own.

The negative critic: He authors art reviews in the smug and arrogant tone of the connoisseur, which invite the reader to place him or herself above the artwork, together with the review. Writing in a sarcastic or bored tone, this type works with the resentments of an audience that has always ‹known better›: art criticism as an accomplice of bigotry.

These four types have one thing in common: they adopt an outside perspective on the art scene; for various reasons, they cannot and do not want to be part of it. By contrast, the following four types of critics consider themselves ‹engaged› and ‹involved,› i.e., as fellow players in the field of art:

The art reporter: This flâneur — or art market court reporter, as this type could be maliciously called — reports in mostly enthusiastic, entertaining and often literary/autobiographical/belletristic terms on art events, occasionally also in the society pages of the entertainment or mass media.

The fellow artist: He thinks he has understood the artwork and wants to give it the final touch through words, seeing himself as a mouthpiece, an extended arm of the artist. This critic plays the role of an artist’s assistant and sometimes even that of a co-artist with equal status.

The pastoral intermediary and paternalistic pedagogue: he tries to give the lay public an understanding of all the ‹difficult› art, using a low-threshold vocabulary; he wants to promote understanding, educate the public and proselytize for art. In post-war Germany, Werner Haftmann was someone who played this role.

The involved agent: He acts as an obvious fan and promotor of particular art movements, schools, artists’ generations and related networks of artists and dealers. Recent art history has seen its share of such allies and midwives of avant-gardes and their ideologies and utopias; just think of Clement Greenberg and Abstract Expressionism.

Engaged on Behalf of Whom?

With regard to this typology and the historical development of art criticism the question arises what engaged art criticism means today? On whose behalf is this criticism ‹engaged›? Is engaged art criticism to be understood as a counterposition to those snobbish, aloof connoisseur-critics who like to denigrate, relativize and at best patronizingly praise? Or does engagement in this context mean empathy with the object of criticism? Or does it mainly express the desire to not have to stand apart in the art scene, but rather to play an active role, contribute, benefit and be part of the party? Let us look at a few of the authors’ assertions.

> «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.»

Benefit and be part of the party and at the same time be able to effectively criticize and change the art scene from within — is that it? The struggle continues, even at the salmon canapé buffet of the art openings and art fair previews — attack (the munchies)! This attitude is strongly reminiscent of the old revolutionary concept of the march through the institutions where, step by step, the marchers turned into representatives of the very system they previously hated so much.

> «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.»

Does this mean a final goodbye to the concept of the work, to consistent, accountable and communicable rules of composition? When it is argued that a work which appears weak in one context can still appear strong and successful elsewhere, at a different occasion and when the assessment of a work is always dependent on the particular setting and timeframe, on the curatorial context and the way it is received by the particular attending public, then an autonomous creative core seems to be no longer crucial. Looked at in this way, the artistic work would come to be devalued and arbitrary.

> «Its premises, (production) conditions and concerns thus make it [engaged art criticism] as transparent as possible.»

Without doubt exemplary. By identifying its relationships and dependencies — unlike all other constantly wheeling and dealing players in the field of art — it leads the way as a positive example and can demand transparency from the others as well or even make it a subject of discussion. But it could also remain without imitators in its virtuousness. After all, the attractiveness of the art market lies precisely in its opaqueness. Cleaning it up would kill it! Transparence would be lethal for business.

> «Engaged art criticism is not a simple value judgment. It comments, differentiates and allows for contradictory movements within.»

Understandable: as a critic one wouldn’t want to stoop to being a price-tag designer of gallery merchandise. But is it possible at all to escape the omnipresent logic of commercialization? Say, by first declaring an artwork to be good and subsequently calling it weak, by creating a long list of ‹on the one hands› and ‹on the other hands› for each work? The point, after all, is not just to raise the value of art through praise or assessments, but rather to express this through a particular amount of attention. Moreover, art criticism without a preference for particular artists or art trends is difficult to imagine, since art history and the art market are fundamentally structured by artists, art genres and styles, and scholarly competence and connoisseurship are inconceivable without specialization in certain fields.

> «Dialogue, debate and contradiction receive particular emphasis in engaged art criticism. […] Various formats of exchange are intended to actively involve the so-called layman.»

Good idea, but what role do laymen play in the context of professional art criticism? What kind of ‹engaged perspective› is expected of them? Are they exotic prompters, ‹noble savages› who inspire criticism from a naïve, emotional perspective? One shouldn’t expect miracles here. Laymen are only human, too; they are usually boring and full of resentment — just like the pros, but in a different way.

Better Stay Outside

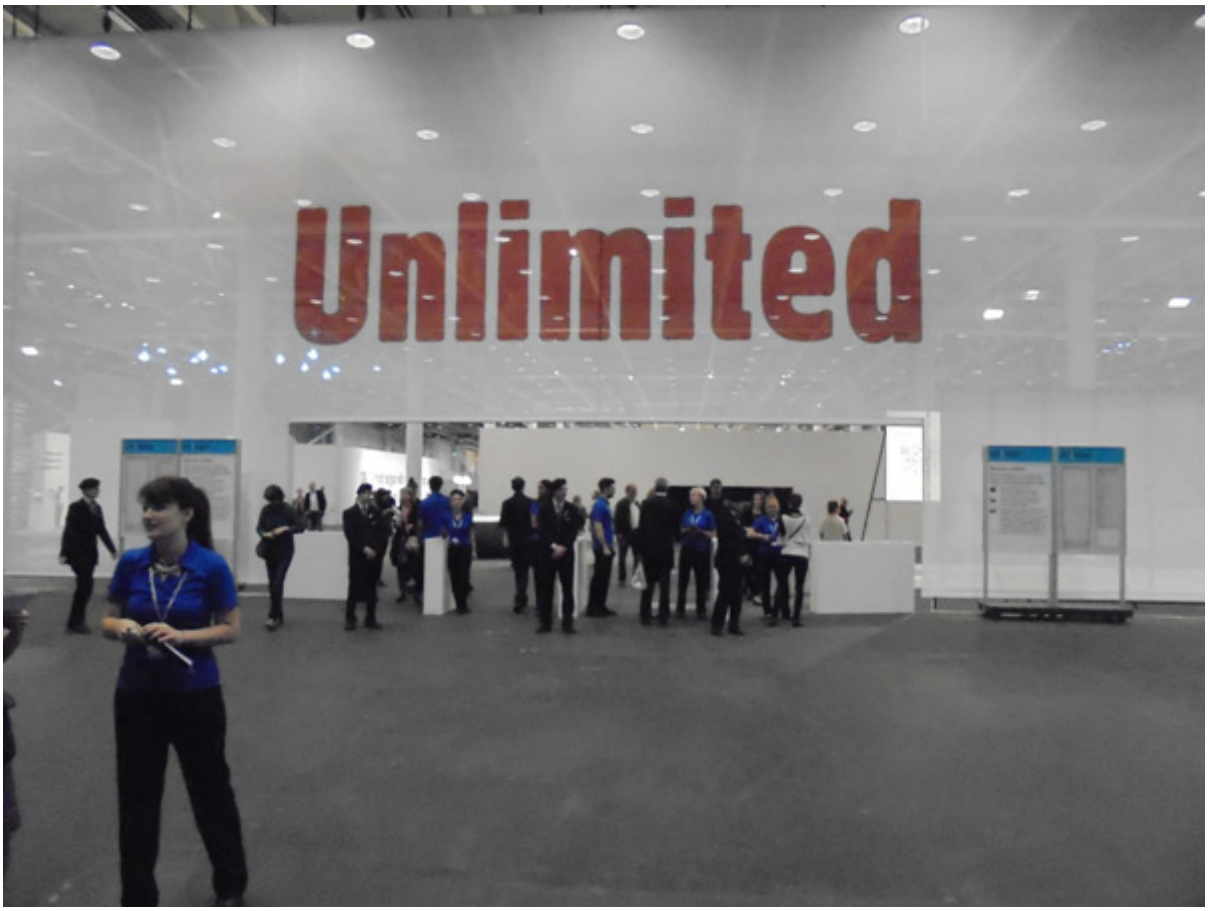
This sample of quotes illustrates the fact that Engaged Art Criticism sees itself as a fellow player in the field of art. Yet the rules of the game and the strength of the teams are determined by others: the well-heeled players of the art market. What options remain for art criticism, to continue the metaphor of ball sports? Dutifully wait on the bench, until the coach sends you on? Until, one day, the art market calls for an academic, intellectual certification of value for its products again? Or deliberately kick the ball out of bounds? Even better: tuck the ball under your arm and run away? Sabotage the game of the art market? Even knowing that

this works only occasionally, that the next best ball boy will immediately throw a replacement onto the field, this would be an act of self-assertion, of the will to independence which Jörg Scheller also calls for in his comments on Engaged Art Criticism.



Everyone in their own art universe. Julius von Bismarck revolves around himself at the 2015 Art Basel. Photo: Christian Saehrendt, 2015.

Resistance or collaboration, staying outside or participating, outsider or insider? And where is the boundary between inside and outside anyway? The key concept of Engaged Art Criticism — as well as of conveying contemporary art in general — seems to be ‹boundary.›. It seems to be all about drawing boundaries. One time it is about defending the boundaries of artistic autonomy, another time about challenging the exclusivity of the art market milieu. Or the principle of inclusion is demanded for as many groups as possible. In many areas the field of art is, in fact, socially quite homogenous, that is, much better off and much more homogenous at least than many of those involved wish. Having a guilty conscience about how privileged they are, they treat marginalized groups — migrants, young mothers, people with dementia or learning disabilities and many others — to art-education offerings. The nightmare of many engaged art critics, art theoreticians, art educators and art curators would be to be degraded to a mere appreciation instrument of an art that serves purely as an upper-class accessory and financial investment. Instead of providing luxury services and expertise for the rich, they rather cleave to a nineteenth-century, quasi-social-democratic concept of popular education. The appropriation of the bourgeois legacy by those segments of the working class that want to advance socially and value education, expressed in the slogans: ‹Good art makes better human beings,›, ‹culture for all› and ‹everyone is an artist.›



Even the exclusive Art Basel woos with the promise of boundlessness. Photo: Christian Saehrendt, 2015.

Hidden by the numerical growth of the art public and many well-meaning paternalistic art-for-all programs, there are, however, exclusionary tendencies that jeopardize the opening up of the art scene toward society — from two fronts no less. One front of exclusion is what goes on in the high-end art market: the fortunes/sums parked there, the capital flowing into it, the high prices, the exclusive events for VIPs, the class society of art openings and fairs. Many art lovers perceive this world as alien and forbidding. Ideology and intellect form another front of exclusion. In this case ideological aspirations, scholarly rhetoric and theoretical discussions reshape art events; a global network of initiates maintains an ideological/philosophical discourse in English that is out of touch with the real world and that many people cannot — and apparently are not meant to — understand. In this sense and contrary to many promises of inclusion, facilitation and participation, contemporary art is heading toward comprehensive elitization. Even the by now fully differentiated system of conveying art could not prevent this. Sociological studies about visitors of art exhibitions confirm this development. The boundaries between high and popular culture have formally and thematically become more porous in recent decades, but «in terms of vocabulary, syntax and codes differences have, if anything, increased,» as noted by the Zürich study Das Kunstfeld.[1]

Be that as it may, the art market has definitely become boundless. In German usage the terms ‹Kunstbetrieb› (art scene) and ‹Kunstmarkt› (art market) are by now congruent. Whatever one writes about art — it is advertising for some product, some brand or some business. New forms of censorship are exercised through the use of copyright. Artists and dealers can withhold reproduction rights at will and thereby effectively stop unwelcome publications. Authors may no longer reproduce what they want to criticize in their writing. And by now even prominent figures are affected by this, as the art historian Wolfgang Ulrich recently lamented with reference to his own work.[2] Given the excessive power of the art market, any ‹engaged› critical position, to me, seems to be problematic.

Disinterested Art Criticism

A strategic and constructive discussion about the role of art criticism is nonetheless necessary. Those who are neither happy to belong to the second-string side of the VIP clique, nor content to be a cog in the appreciation machine of the art market should ask themselves the fundamental questions: why still write about art today and why be active as a critic? It would be an existentialist theme to digest in this way — in a soliloquy, as it were — personal experiences and impressions. But being a social being, you really write for other people, for a general or a very specific public. In many cases, the target group is located outside of the art scene. Those who write want to catch the attention of other players in the field of art, endear themselves to them and put themselves forward for ‹greater tasks.›



Critic in action. The author in the maze of the Venice Biennale. Photo: Deborah Lewer, 2013.

Yet potentially there is also a public outside of the art scene. For this target group it is necessary to translate specialist discourses, as it were, to examine the artworks and the art discourses for their relevance for society and everyday reality and, if necessary, to also remove one or two bogeymen from their pedestals, to deflate PR bubbles, to air dirty laundry, to represent things and discourses without marketing deception and intellectual blague. This also includes challenging contemporary art’s promise of inclusion: is this promise serious at

all or just façade, self-deception on the part of those active in the field of art? And, finally, what happens in the art market can also have entertainment value for a lay public. There are wonderful stories to be told of hope, ascent and fall, of friendship, lies and deceit, of enthusiasm, arrogance and vanity: the art market as a stage. To this end, it is probably better to observe art events with a certain cool, an inner and outer distance. An attitude of cheerful cynicism which may be better described by the term ‹disinterested art criticism›; disinterested, because it doesn’t holds any shares in the art market and doesn’t take a stand in the self-referential art discourses, and interested only to the extent what art can offer to society as a whole, to the public at large.

[1] Munder, Heike and Ulf Wuggenig (eds.). *Das Kunstfeld. Eine Studie über Akteure und Institutionen der zeitgenössischen Kunst am Beispiel von Zürich, Wien, Hamburg und Paris.* Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2012.

[2] Ulrich, Wolfgang, «Abbildungsverbote». *H-ArtHist*, February 23, 2016. Accessed April 19, 2016, http://arthist.net/archive/12261 [http://arthist.net/archive/12261].

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