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This Side of Good and Evil

On a Symposium about the Relationship of Critique and Affirmation

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The international symposium *Was ist Kritik? (What is Critique?)* at the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein (N.B.K.) put up for discussion «the relationship between critique and affirmation from different perspectives» (press release). In the process the assertion that a critical attitude implying and presupposing affirmations took center stage. This focusing made for a concentrated reflection on the same, but blocked out more radical forms of critique.





In the exhibition space of N.B.K.

Quasi as a prelude to the symposium, the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy, in his lecture titled «Our Age Is No Longer the Actual Age of Critique»at the Hebbel am Ufer (HAU) theater in Berlin (28 January 2016) intoned, among other things, the question of the relevance of critique in light of the global crises of capitalism. How does critique relate to power in this context, how can it be more than a subjective form of critique of progress that, by now, calls for new narratives?

Held for two days at the N.B.K. and always well attended, the symposium itself opened with a «statement» by the Berlin-based philosopher Marcus Steinweg who marked out the discursive framework for the subsequent individual lectures. Steinweg divided his introductory lecture into three sections: 1. What is critique? 2. What would a critique of critique look like? And 3. How does critique relate to affirmation? Critique is, as explicitly simplified by Steinweg, a thinking of the world that questions the latter as «reality.» A critique of critique would be characterized by the fact that it is aware of its inability to cope with the over-complexity of the world — that it thus would never have a real «overview» (Steinweg) vis-à-vis what it is supposed to critique. In this context Steinweg reminds us of the difference between «choice» and «decision »: «choice» chooses between existing things, while «decision» opens up new horizons. The course for the symposium was set especially by Steinweg's subsequent discussion of the relationship between critique and affirmation, as he started from the assumption that any critique is affirmative — in the sense that it can always swim against the tide of the world, but only if it stays within this tide, that is, on this side of assumed reality. Accordingly, a potential outside seems to be no option (anymore).

This dominance of reality then determined major focal points of the individual lectures that followed. Thomas Hirschhorn's almost pedagogical remarks about his own artistic work were a case in point. The only visual artist who participated in the symposium with a lecture, Hirschhorn expanded by reference to his collages and more recent ‹pixel works› his understanding of a «critical body» to be established by him. This body is not just critical, the Swiss artist explained, but also the object of critique, because it is in a critical state. And it moves through the world trembling, hovering and self-confidently asserting itself — the latter especially because Hirschhorn invariably resorts to elements of existing reality in his work. Out of these elements he, as a visual artist, then composes his pictorial worlds — while emphatically «turning off the brain» (Hirschhorn) and taking great risks. Even though Hirschhorn hopes to create new things this way, for instance, in the medium of collage, he is still swimming along in the tide of our postmodern flood of images in his art — admittedly, in a highly critical way, but still dependent on the choice of those images.

Eva Illouz, a sociologist teaching in Jerusalem, went so far in her lecture as to say that capitalism not only manages to convert emotion into a commodity, but also, for this very reason, to determine how we assess issues. In this case, too, critique thus remains explicitly within the framework of the existing system that defines man; accordingly, the «beyond» (Illouz) of an alternate life is considered as a possibility only within the context of the prevailing economy. Here at the latest one could ask — a dissenting argument from the audience promptly raised the issue — whether this emphasis of the power of that which exists is not a kind of preemptive obedience that (inadvertently) plays into the hands of globalized capitalism.

The lecture by Sabeth Buchmann, a professor of art history at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts, was the only one over the course of the quite fascinating two-day symposium to deal specifically with art criticism. She argued decidedly against a form of critique that engages in a brilliant play of fact and fiction, while deliberately blocking out social complications, examples of which, she claims, can be frequently observed in so-called «post-normative» critique. Buchmann's lecture instead focused on the rhetorical figure of «polymorphous speech» (Buchmann), since this figure is able to pose the questions «when, where, why, what, whose,» which Buchmann considers crucial for art criticism, at the same time from the most widely varying perspectives. These questions raise the sensitive implications of critique with power and society, which Michel Foucault had already introduced into the discussion in his 1978 lecture «What Is Critique?» (which gave the symposium its name) when defining the «critical attitude» as one that aims to defy, challenge and limit the arts of government. Yet in spite of this system-critical approach, Foucault famously pointed out also that critique is

«both partner and adversary.»[1] According to Buchmann, critique is a «partner,» because nowadays it is part of the capitalist logic and elements of critique can be found even in advertising. Hence it was no coincidence that she counted among the examples of an art criticism of polymorphous speech the strategy of «camp,» which Susan Sontag had analyzed in her 1964 essay Notes on Camp. After all, this strategy, too, is characterized by reinterpreting existing aesthetic formulations. So, again, the issue is: swimming critically against the tide within the tide.

An ugly example of the fact that critique can, indeed, become completely merged into capitalist logic was the appearance of the writer Maxim Biller, which concluded the symposium. For all that Biller was able to contribute was a market-minded form of self-promotion that amounted to nothing more than post-pubertarian provocation à la «A person wearing ill-fitting jackets cannot be a good critic.» And he was the only participant in the symposium who refused to speak one minute beyond the time for which he was to be paid.

Despite this gaffe, the symposium overall was an intense and mostly sophisticated exploration of the subject. It is just a pity that more radical forms of critique, which consider a life beyond the really existing system conceivable and, indeed, specifically work on this — just think of the Occupy Movement, for instance —, were in accordance with good academic practice ignored by all participants.

The second part of the symposium takes place at the Institute for Contemporary Art Research of the Zürich University of the Arts on April 1–2.

[1] 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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