

SIXTH INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF ART CRITICS

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Topic of Discussion 1

METHOD AND TERMINOLOGY OF ART CRITICISM

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When this topic, arising out of discussions among our Dutch friends, was originally suggested, it was done so in the full consciousness of the personal danger to which responsible critics would be exposed in discussing modern art. The examples they quoted of the multiple meanings of the terms employed are an immediate cause of controversy.

Anyone studying cultural development will come across historical and critical terms that have changed their meaning and value in accordance with the environments and periods in which they were used. One may conclude that such a situation is a matter of historical change and accept it as such, but that would be, to some extent, side-stepping the issue.

At the foundation of all critical research into a period of history, the need of verifying the basic vocabulary of the period concerned, i.e. its ideas, exists, and there is no doubt that critical interpretation must benefit from such a procedure. Moreover, every age and every civilization is marked by its own favourite ideas which best describe it, and the terms used have particular significance at certain ages and then disappear. To return to the problem with which we are more particularly concerned, we could undertake a thorough revision of the terms already referred to by our Dutch friends, such as realism, naturalism, abstract, etc., by trying to find basic definitions; or perhaps our investigation might be extended to include other concepts current in everyday speech and critical literature, in order to collect the greatest possible number of ideas that are a reflection of our time. These research projects,

which would certainly be constructive tasks, could be carried out in two ways, viz., by the compilation of a glossary which would give the historical variations of the terms concerned in accordance with strict philosophical criteria, or by giving a picture of our era through the organic representation in a coherent whole of the immense number of terms used and meanings accepted.

In my opinion, these two important tasks cannot be carried out at this Congress but the latter can restrict its researches to a certain number of items which could be discussed either theoretically or with reference to aesthetic experiences. Such procedures might be useful if we at the same time ask ourselves the reasons for the existence of the problem. One of the reasons is obviously the fact that such terms are derived not only from various fields of thought such as science, philosophy, sociology and literature, but also from the confused residue of a number of cultures. All this is due to the defective organization of our consciousness, of our culture and of contemporary society, to their not always parallel, and often unconnected, evolution. In my view, the above is a feature peculiar to the anguish of our time, and not a mere matter of vocabulary.

Obviously, the most important factor in discussion, or even in ordinary speech, is to be clear as to the meaning of the terms employed. But is that sufficient to enable us to reach agreement? I do not believe it is, for it cannot be confirmed either in ethics, politics, or religion. The fact is that to understand the meaning of a critical concept is not enough. One must be able to participate in it, to live in it. It is a process that cannot be achieved merely through intellectual knowledge. Moreover, critics are divided not only by words but also by attitudes based on individual ideas, emotions and deep-rooted aspirations. But we shall not end on a relativist note. We are concerned with attitudes of mind, of choices forming part of the general

cultural and historical dialectical processes of our time.

The above is not as simple and unequivocal as is sometimes asserted by politicians or philosophers. It is for that reason that the responsibility of every individual is implicated in his answers, for we are not dealing merely with the question of giving definitions, but of arriving at genuine historical judgments.

We may rejoice in the multiplicity of ideas as a sign of vitality, as a treasure-house of content. This is only true when justice has been done to every obsolete attitude implying the fear of facing up to difficult and ever-changing situations.

That is why cultural verification and revision are at the base of every critical and intellectual operation. That is why, although there are not so many specific answers, each must fit in with the other terms and factors. That is why there can be no definitive answers, and the best appear to be those that are easier to understand and more capable of contributing to the solutions of our problems.