

*Section polonaise*

Anda Rottenberg

WHY ARE WE DISOBEDIENT?

Whenever art critique begins to examine itself there appears the inevitable question: who is the art critic and whom does his work serve? In my country, where every issue is solved upon a governmental level, numerous decrees and decisions have been made dealing with this problem. From the time when first efforts were made to implement a socialist system "by the will of the nation", this problem seemed to emerge at every turning point of history's course. Immediately after the war it was decided that critics (and the "whole progressive intelligentsia" <sup>are</sup> ~~is~~) to win over the artistic milieu to the ideology of Marx-Lenin-Stalin and to the communist system. Since this was by no means an easy task, it was announced by way of encouragement that the State will take care of artists, build studios and regularly subsidise their projects, purchase their works, organise exhibitions and not allow any genius to die of hunger - an inexcusable event which could take place only under capitalism. The state did not expect the artist to make any particular sacrifices and for the time being permitted him to retain his freedom in selecting contents and form. This situation did not last long. Already in 1947 Boleslaw Bierut, the President of the Republic, stated that the most important task of the intellectual is to disseminate art among the broad masses. To guarantee the success of this venture, art must change its <sup>hitherto</sup> ~~heretofore~~ features. It is to become national in form and socialist in content. A list of permissible topics and an iconographic programme, compulsory for every theme, were prepared. It was forbidden to propose one's own artistic solutions. In this way, Polish art criticism became recruited into political service.



The viewpoints from which art was judged had nothing in common with aesthetics or any other category concerning artistic problems. The <sup>(art)</sup>critic played the role of a mediator in making the artist dependent upon the apparatus of power. Critical opinions in the early fifties had the gravity of court verdicts; an obstinate artist was deprived of state patronage and since the latter enjoyed the position of a monopoly, he remained without means of subsistence. This was the case with Wladyslaw Strzeminski, a tireless spokesman of the avant garde and of progressive social reforms who died of tuberculosis, in poverty and humiliating isolation.

The period of socialist realism was a time of enormous <sup>insincere</sup> ~~honest~~ critical activity; it was at the same time, fortunately, the last when the opinions of art critics were decisive for the participation of an artist in cultural life. Around 1955 art critique lost its political function of an overseer and became incapable of producing such a model which would be equal to the previous one from the point of view of quantity. Certain attempts at stimulating the artistic milieu did take place in the 1956-1959 period, but this was also a time for settling accounts with the earlier years and for "catching up", and before the new model could be established, we were already presented with another slogan: art (and critique) in the service of society. This was a disguised decision to return to socialist realism, with a simultaneous transference of patronage onto the trade unions, well-controlled and steered by the authorities. Arrangements were even made for the number of abstract works not to exceed 10 per cent of all the exhibits shown in a gallery. Who was to observe such directives? Obviously, the art critic <sup>(who was the organizer of)</sup> ~~organising~~ the exhibition <sup>and responsible</sup> ~~was assigned~~ for its content.



~~such a role.~~ The trust placed in the critics was, however, already much strained both as regards the artists and the authorities. After the October "thaw" <sup>(1954)</sup> persons totally uncompromised, or compromised "only" to a slight degree, embarked upon critical activity but soon after everyone was able to voice his opinion freely, although not everyone was heard or not by everyone to an equal degree. One thing is certain, the authorities paid heed to those whom they could depend upon. Just in case, they began to build up their own system of dependencies in which the critic, although perhaps still desirable ceased to be indispensable. The state used its administrative apparatus, network of sales and service enterprises as well as the galleries to make the artist fully dependent. At the same time the Union of Artists, directed by persons completely controlled by the authorities, expanded, grew increasingly powerful and decided to ~~totally~~ ignore the critics whose possibilities suddenly diminished. The artist discovered that he is quite independent of the critic who could not influence the market since in Poland the art market is for all practical purposes nonexistent, had no impact as regards purchases made by museums and scholarships ( at home and abroad) and whose opinion was not decisive for the social evaluation of an art work since his range of influence via the mass media was minimal and the opinion itself was deformed by censorship and editorial manipulations. It became almost a principle that the more universal the mass media, the greater the manipulation, even in the field of simple information. It was still possible to make a relatively free statement in an exhibition leaflet ( whose number would not exceed, for example, 500, obviously censored) but not in a daily newspaper and even more not on television.



Artistic] critique, therefore, became in a certain sense an aimless and, due to the fact that it provided meagre incomes, a gratuitous activity. <sup>(However, some did)</sup> Old habits still survived, together with the need to act and the today quite incomprehensible hope that despite all odds something can be gained as long as one is able to conduct a skilful game with the authorities to win support for real values at the price of "small concessions" - to sacrifice that or another artist or, more often, certain opinions. New linguistic complications stemmed not so much from the willingness to decipher the artistic situation which grew increasingly involved from year to year, but, on the contrary, with the intention to blur its image or to publish certain information using a code.

This "objectivising" model of art criticism appeared in the 1960s and first consisted of a thorough and often brilliant examination of fragments of artistic problems which, nevertheless, systematically ignored the whole phenomenon, particularly as regards negative estimates. I should at this point explain a certain detail which might seem to be of an anecdotic nature: the earlier mentioned directive concerning the permissible 10 per cent of abstract works, together with the official support for all forms of figurative art, and especially for realism, although not necessarily socialist, resulted in abstract art becoming the expression of rebellion (or at least opposition) towards the authorities and a demonstration of independence. Later on, in the 1970s, it was to become a refuge from real problems and pure camouflage. An honest critic cooperated with the struggling artist. He therefore tried to support abstract art but in a manner acceptable to the authorities.



What emerged from this method in the 1970s, or rather right after 1968, was a degenerate form of a process which was initiated, after all, in good faith. The principle which dominated at that time can be summed up briefly: "praise if possible, keep silent when there is no other option". The latter held true for two diametrically opposite groups of artists: the official ones and those who found themselves, of their own volition or by the decisions of others, outside the so-called artistic system.

The first group was not criticised (in the literal meaning of the term) - and this I regard as degeneration - for very unclear reasons. Perhaps in this case habit played a decisive role - to write only that and only in such a way as to avoid trouble. The instinct of self-preservation transformed us into our own censors. We chose solutions which would enable our personal losses to be much smaller than social profit. An attack directed against an official artist could, after all, result in various consequences: prohibition of further publication under one's own name, and end to trips abroad and, more rarely, the loss of a job. It could but did not have to. As a rule, official dissatisfaction was expressed in taking away privileges (if one enjoyed them previously) or not in granting them. The privileges of an art critic included participation in organising international exhibitions which, in turn, signified a trip abroad, paid by the state, as well as simply professional satisfaction. No other privilege could be taken into consideration unless the critic was also a state official (which was sometimes the case) or a party official (this also occurred). These were reasons enough to paralyse any pen; one had to keep them in mind as well as the presence of censorship. If at times (and these were extremely rare instances) we tried to



obliterate those facts from our minds and write as if censorship did not exist, like children who pretend that there is no big bad wolf, then we were making an attempt upon our own lives, not in the physical meaning, of course, but from the professional point of view. It is not really important whether by observing <sup>self-</sup>censorship we were guided by an actual evaluation of the situation or only by a myth of the all-present authority. Considering that this procedure was followed (consciously or not) by 90 per cent of the professional group and, by practically all Polish authors, including avid supporters of the regime, one could say that we all lived in a state of paranoia.

(As to the second group of <sup>(artists we were)</sup> critics ~~was~~ not, unfortunately, as uniform. It is true that there was little praise but the silence was not always unanimous. At times, there appeared in the press an attack, apparently completely uncontrolled and directed against the opposition but this was extremely rare.

Why did we keep silent towards that group? Part of the answer lies in the lack of adequate linguistic instruments which characterised the majority of authors, since work on language was conducted rather in quiet university libraries than in the open, and even then on an irregular basis, without any general research programmes. The rest of the answer is to be found in an analysis conducted a rebours, of the same motives which pertained to the official group. I should like to recall that one of the most characteristic traits of art in the seventies was the demonstration of the artist's attitude, the emphasis on such categories as ethics and world outlook. The artist felt that he is subject to various manipulations carried out by society and particularly by the artistic "system"



which in the West is of a commercial nature and in Poland - predominantly political. If a critic identified his own position with that of the artist, he was forced to make a decision to leave the "system", that is, he had to cease his cooperation with the government-controlled mass media and to limit himself to semi-private declarations of a purely private character. This was perhaps the simplest and most honest way, but no one would choose it of his own volition. There remained a semi-solution: positive opinions voiced upon the margin of the main trend of social life (closed symposia, plein air <sup>workshops</sup> ~~exhibits~~ and <sup>art conferences</sup> ~~sessions~~) and refraining from negative criticism. Such a criticism would, after all, indicate the existence of people unsatisfied with the existing state of things, not only in the domain of art. No one was capable of <sup>giving the</sup> ~~guaranteeing~~ that his opinion would not cause restrictions towards an artist, group or gallery (such steps were taken by the authorities without the "written proof" of an article). Furthermore, there was no such guarantee even in the case of an attempted objective examination of an artistic situation, since such a situation could be considered as unsuitable for the system.

The paralysis, or <sup>suppression</sup> ~~silencing~~ of <sup>art</sup> criticism has therefore yet another source apart from censorship - ethics. Years of "reading between the lines" and dropping hints made us unused to clarity and simplicity. The "discursive" form was universally accepted both among writers and readers. Against such a background, the only expressive criticisms were those written upon official orders. The appearance of such a criticism meant the beginning of repressions which did not constitute an aim in themselves but formed a stage of political strife. After decades of living with such practices, which always increased during



crucial historical moments, the author must have been conscious of the fact that his text could be regarded as a report and used by any official who would want to treat it as the basis for his own manipulations. We did not write about certain issues because we were afraid for ourselves, and we were silent about other matters out of an ordinary sense of decency. Perhaps this is the reason why we forgot what the tasks of criticism are, just as we forgot in our time that science is supposed to serve truth because every day we were taught in the press and by slogans upon banners that the forces of science serve the nation or socialism. In our stultifying everyday efforts we were unable to sufficiently safeguard impartiality, the greatest merit of criticism <sup>of</sup> which even history was incapable of depriving us. In the entire chaos of directives, we lost the simplest one - that criticism is to serve art and its real values and not the state, society, <sup>not</sup> or even the artist.

The leading theme of this Congress includes, *implicite* the premise that social changes influence the functioning of critique. History teaches us that the more violent the change, the greater its cultural resonance. Such violent changes include wars and revolutions whose cultural consequence takes on the form of profound revaluations in the field of aesthetics. The events of August 1980 were without violence because the revolutionary tide spread predominantly to the sphere of social ethics. This was their greatest and, let us hope, most permanent achievement. In a country where for some decades attempts were made to build all values on illusions, it was finally and loudly proclaimed that "the emperor is naked", a fact clearly visible to all. The calling of things by their name



became first the delight of eating the forbidden fruit, and then an organic necessity. Should one be surprised that the critics, obviously not all, but a decisive majority of the members of the AICA, resigned from the rather dubious, it is true, but only available professional and financial profits of cooperation with the authorities, and launched their own activity? The report presented by Aleksander Wojciechowski, Chairman of the Polish Section, shows <sup>briefly</sup> ~~in simple language and facts~~ the manner in which Polish art criticism functions today. Let me add that all the initiatives presented therein are realised as a rule in free time, without any payments and often with the aid of personal financial contributions. Let history judge whether these truly heroic decisions will bring about any social profits. Today we are able to see that for the first time the harsh Roman principle of 'divide et impera' cannot be realised, that the practice of stirring up and setting against each other of peasants and workers, intellectuals and students, artists and critics, does not work. The independent position of the artist became a supreme value in Polish art and the critic helps to retain and develop this attitude. Both the artist and the critic are engaged in reinstating the long-forgotten humanistic category of truth in Polish art and art criticism.

We are left with the question often posed by our foreign colleagues: should all the positions have been forsaken instead of attempting to retain them? 15 months of Solidarity were, above all, a period of a struggle waged for podiums from which one could expound one's own opinions. The outcome of that struggle is universally known. Nevertheless, we have tried to remain a i n everywhere where it was feasible to do so. The best example of that attempt is the over one-and-a-half year long



struggle for preserving our own terrain of expression which was the bi-monthly "Project" whose editorial board even agreed to the legal intervention of censorship in order to obtain the opportunity to publish selected materials. When it became obvious that the publishers began removing texts already censored, which meant a revival of the illegal preventive censorship, well-established in the entire Polish press, the editors were forced to resign. This decision was made for ethical reasons since otherwise they would have been compelled to deal with what in Poland is known as <sup>"an egg partially rotten"</sup> ~~(the partially rotten egg)~~, that is with a watering and toning down of all categories, with a return to disguising thought hidden behind a "meta-language" and with disbelief of our own eyes since it became impossible for the emperor to be naked. And suddenly, it would again appear that the critics have to fulfill a task of state importance and must be employed in, for example, a struggle for economic reform just as once they struggled for the agrarian reform. The latter soon changed into the collectivisation<sup>ior</sup> of agriculture and it became necessary to immediately change fronts. If we are disobedient, it is because we must finally cut the Möbiusian sash which we chase around in circles, because there might come a moment when our children, or grandchildren will want to hang us with it.