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### SELF-REFERENTIAL VERSUS CRITICAL

The text that I am reading at this moment is self-referential in double manner: it concerns the problem of self-reference and criticism on theoretical level and, at the same time, since I am an art critic myself, it deals with my personal experience and practice of criticism as well. It is a kind of critique of theory and practice of criticism. Actually, I would like to trace the ways in which the art, art criticism and curatorship are inter-linked in the newly born practices as artist-critic, artist-curator, and critic-curator through the phenomenon of self-reference.

It might sound like cutting the branch on which one is sitting, a bold act, when I criticize the critics who while attempting to find a new methodology of criticism, more adequate to the arts, merged in the field of art - in fact, in most of my projects I am trying to do exactly the same. Still, in the fashion that L. Wittgenstein is convinced that the critical principles and criteria themselves should be subjected to criticism: that they must be self-referential<sup>1</sup>, it seems necessary to point to the possible danger if the equation is made between art and art criticism. It does not necessarily mean that the new kind of critique and curatorship that would be more creative are not needed, especially in the time of the flourishing of the new media, but this text should be considered only as a call for a kind of precocious attitude toward the criticism that goes artistic or art that goes critical while pointing to their own principles.

At this moment there is a strong tendency that tries to challenge the distinction between art and art criticism arguing that the critical writing should also become artistic - self-conscious as the art itself. This orientation is not anything new and related only to postmodernism: it is a tradition going back to Schlegel, Wilde, Benjamin and Barthes.

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<sup>1</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 218.

What should be clarify here is the need for a distinction between the calls for a more creative critique in the modernism and the notion of creative and self-conscious critical writing within the deconstructive discourse and practice.

One of the crucial points to make in order to distinguish the presupposed changes is the different approach that the various critical tendencies had toward the self-referentiality. the most problematized issue by the critics of modernism was the problem of the (in) adequacy of the image to its referent. According to Craig Owens *"modernist theory presupposes that mimesis, the adequation of an image to a referent can be bracketed or suspended, and that the art object itself can be substituted (metaphorically) for its referent..."*<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, Owens finds the postmodernists' approach toward the reference different because it does not negate the referent but it problematizes the activity of the reference. It is not easy to bring arguments in favor of this assertion because it is not very clear if deconstruction is not based exactly on self-reference as Paul de Man has stated it: for him, the practice of deconstruction and self-reflectivity are the same phenomenon because the self-reflection is in accordance with the rhetoric nature of the text and art language which tend to escape from the logocentric illusions and metaphysics.<sup>3</sup> It is interesting that de Man connects the self-referential texts with the ambivalence and ambiguity, which are natural entities of the language of literature. In contrary, Rodolphe Gasché<sup>4</sup> denies that the ambiguity is an assumption of Derrida's deconstruction since he asserted that about writing it is not possible to think in the terms of subject. For Gasché, Derrida developed the concept of deconstruction exactly to explain the contradictions contained in the self-reference which are in fact metaphysical.



It seems that the question of self-reference, when it comes to the deconstruction and critics who followed Derrida, gets more complicated and leads to many misunderstandings. While trying to find the difference between criticism and post-criticism, Gregory Ulmer<sup>5</sup> introduces the distinction between "narrative allegory" and "allegoresis". "Allegoresis" would be the mode that has been practiced by the traditional critics who suspend the surface of the text and apply the terminology of "verticalness, levels, hidden meanings, the hieratic difficulty of interpretation" whereas "the narrative allegory favors the material of signifier over the meaning of the signified."<sup>6</sup>

In order to highlight the practical value of this approach it is useful to take account of the "new mimesis" invented by Derrida as a kind of representation without reference by putting mimicry to work for a new reference, as in the mechanical reproduction. R. Lane Kaufman has criticized this model of relationship between the critical strategy and its chosen referent<sup>7</sup> for not being aware of the cognitive distance from its material, the distance that criticism should share with art. In Kaufman opinion this problem comes from the role of the criticism, which is not simply to join, but only by maintaining its generic distance can criticism summon the powers to censure art's complicity with the existing order, and to understand its strivings for a different one.

Kaufman reminds us on Adorno's critique of Benjamin's striving for criticism which would be closer to art: *"A philosophy that tried to imitate art, that would turn itself into a work of art, would be expunging itself."*<sup>8</sup> Contrary to the assumptions of the post-criticism, the generic distinction between art and art criticism does not rest on an authoritarian appeal to the superordinate status of reason over the senses, nor on the putative ontological boundary between critical and literary language. It is grounded rather on the discrete cognitive and social functions of art and criticism, and on their attendant institutional differentiation.

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The lack of this differentiation is almost the same reason that, according to Peter Bürger<sup>9</sup> made possible the failure of the avant-garde movements in their main task: to rebel against art's autonomy. This confusion between art and art criticism and all paradoxes that follow from it are the results of the paradoxes hidden in the language and its own self-referential nature.<sup>10</sup> Similar to Russel's principle of vicious circle in the set theory, within the

deconstruction and its followers in art criticism there is an open field for paradoxes of self-referentiality, even when they are put into question.

Whenever the operation of deconstruction is utilized on a totality of a certain kind, it produces a new entity of that kind. When it is used on the totality of all entities of that kind it has to produce something which is inside and outside of this totality (the problem of parergon).

In all polemics about the meaning of *différance* (the central Derrida's term) it comes across the paradox of something which is ineffable and we still talk about it and try to express it. This paradox comes from Derrida's ambiguous definition of *différance*: as a term that we come to after the deconstruction of one text although there are no facts about this term expressed in this particular text and the definition of *différance* as a result of deconstructing of the totality of all linguistic elements.<sup>11</sup>

Whenever a critic points to his own task and methods it necessarily means a possible danger from the self-referential isolation from its own art object - while the relation between the art object and its own referent can easily be interrupted without a real attack to the existential status of the both, the link between the art critique and its object would lead to a referentless critique.

While in the field of theory this problem of loosing the connection with its object would only mean that the theory is not in accordance with the reality as in Baudrillard's<sup>12</sup> claim that the theory should not be a description but an event, in the practice of art criticism this

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can lead to art criticism which criticize nothing and art objects which are not touched by its criticism.

Namely, *"self-reference is the only mechanism by which something can be created in our linguistic practice. It is only here that our saying and believing something to be so can, nonmysteriously, make it so, that is, by accomplishing something like a collective and self-fulfilling 'performative utterance'."*<sup>13</sup>

These simplest cases of self-justifying and self-referring talk – the performative acts, are perfect miniature cases of linguistic idealism in action that is a truth and reality created and constituted by a linguistic practice, often used by the institutional aesthetic theory as a means for legitimization of any aesthetic assertions.

This problem can be extended to its paradoxical and radical limits on purpose: to show that one of the main tasks of the art criticism today is to change its own methods as the arts have been transformed so much that it is impossible to attempt to construct a true or a correct representation or interpretation of the object and its meanings. Instead of explanation, criticism should better move toward a process of creation.

The problem pointed through the paradoxes of self-reference lies in the call for the abolition of the theory's autonomous status and its reintegration into the practice of art, which would mean the abolition of any possibility for reformation. Instead of new kind of procedure of criticism there is a danger of its abdication and trivialization. Merging with art by renouncing its own procedures and embracing those of art, the criticism takes the risk of abolishing itself instead to tend to become more critical and more creative.

Therefore the distinctions that should be made between the art critic, curator and the artist in the realm of self-referentiality (although all these different practices can still be positively interfering and interweaving) are to be appropriate to the different critical level of each of these professions. The subtle differentiation between art, art criticism and curating can be a satisfactory answer: while the curator could go deeply in the creative and structural processing of the work side by side with the artist providing the process of

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installing the work with positive criticism, the critic could have freedom of criticizing the final results

of their mutual efforts.

Finally, it should not be forgotten that the efficacy of any ideology consists in part in the formation of conscience: it designates a kind of turning back reflexivity which is constituted through this moment of conscience and it is simultaneous with a turning toward the law.<sup>14</sup>

Art criticism and curatorial work are being established as a kind of powerful ideology, partly due to their self-referentialism and performativity. These exercises of power perpetually cause the emerging of new objects of self-knowledge and accumulates new bodies of information that conversely induces effects of power<sup>15</sup>. Thus it becomes obvious that self-referentialism is not necessarily opposite to the critical but it can also strengthen it.

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