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Hélène Lassalle (AICA-France)

Actors without Part : Art Criticism and its Self-definition in Historical Perspective

What art criticism is about ? What an art critic is ? What is he supposed to do and what for ? Is there any way to change or to improve his problematic position ? While everybody is complaining about a crisis in the arts, the art critic himself no longer seems to know which part he is to play in the new art scene.

In the mid-eighties, the American sociologist Vera Zolberg did not go beyond the concept - somewhat broad and vague - of "art writer". She did not make any difference between history of art, art theory, and art criticism or even art journalism. And so did Lionello Venturi when he wrote his *History of art criticism* in 1936. From Venturi's point of view, art criticism began with the Greeks and Romans. He considered *The Commentaries* by Lorenzo Ghiberti, Vasari's *Le Vite* (The "Lives" of artists) or Alberti's treatise on painting as pieces of art criticism. For him writing on art and art criticism had the same meaning.

In the late forties the situation was unchanged and everybody felt it was a real problem. Newspapers and art magazines were echoing fierce debates between supporters of abstract art and representational art, between nationalism and internationalism, and they were battlefields for the champions of the new "isms" in art which were discovered and labelled everyday. In Paris, the Museum of Modern Art opened in 1947 with Jean Cassou as a director. Jean Cassou appeared to be surprisingly old fashioned and French oriented. No Surrealists, no abstract art, no foreign artists could be seen on the walls. Picasso had to give a few paintings to be part of the show : nothing but the "French tradition". In the rest of Europe, Germany was still under the shock of the war and was hardly recovering from the chasing of the so called "degenerated art" by the Nazis and so was Italy after the fascist years and their pompous neoclassical official art. Meanwhile a new scene had just opened in New York, which Europe pretended to ignore.

UNESCO was founded in November 1945. Mjomir Vanek, from Tchechoslovakia, was in charge of the Fine Arts Program which he could not launch for money reasons. Nonetheless, before he quitted the Organisation, he suggested Raymond Cogniat, who was the chairman of the Union of the Artistic Press in France, that he should organise an international conference in order to "discuss the majors issues in terms of methods and of aesthetics that art critics and artists were up to deal with on an international level." Raymond Cogniat, he said, should think about

an international association. This was the starting point. In June 1949 and a year later in July 1949 art critics from all over the world met in Paris at the UNESCO headquarters. By the end of the second conference the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) was born. For the first time aims, methods, ethics, cultural politics were the core of the debates as well as the specific role of art critics in our society towards the living artists and the public as well. It was a stepping stone even though Serge Guilbaut made a bitter comment on those meetings in an essay he wrote for the catalogue of a Swiss exhibition in 1991, *Art curtain, iron curtain, art criticism in 1948*. Guilbaut complained about the participants, officials mostly, or old celebrated priests of the official cult. He noticed how traditional the speakers were. As a matter of fact, if quite a few papers seem to be obsolete or pointless today, they are interesting for us to understand what the artscene of the time was about, how complex it was. The people who attended the conference were curators (of all periods), art historians, professors, classic scholars, writers and poets, editors, publishers, journalists, artists with no distinction whatsoever. When they talked about the building of an international documentation they meant a museum documentation such as the one the Paintings Department at the Louvre was in the process of gathering together as well as a network through which art critics could be provided with catalogues on living artists. Such a network was set up after the second conference and it was to run during several years. Museums or galleries would send their catalogues to the Aica Office in Paris which would charge them for mailing the material to every single critic who was a member of the Association. That meant an average of 20 catalogues a year, sent out to 70 or 80 art critics around the world.

On the other hand - and this is important - a distinction was made between history of art and art criticism. For the first time art criticism was clearly bound up with modern art. Describing and analyzing the past, even a recent one, in retrospect, and promoting the creation of living artists in the turmoil of contradictory tendencies, involved different viewpoints and different strategies, and they had very little in common, as André Chastel and Marc Sandoz pointed out. Many speakers agreed that the critic's approach must be emotional. Some of them added that an art critic might be desoriented or even at a loss. An art critic had to reveal what was new, they said, while an art historian focussed on chronology, provenance, style, schools or groups, filiations and influences, the historical context, and the creating conditions and circumstances.

Curiously enough quite a number of art critics insisted they were a new type of pedagogues, that their main responsibility was towards the public, because the more abstract or distorted, and shocking, modern art had turned to be, the more rebuffed the public had grown. There was far too big a gap between the artists and the public. Art critics, they thought, had

to explain the meaning of the new works of art. Their first commitment was to convert the everyday man to modern art. It was what they were to be accounted for. Such a statement might sound rather strange today as specific means have developed in that respect. Professionals using new technologies of all kinds have made their appearance over the last decades, education people in museums of modern art, exhibitions designers, slides shows, special publications, TV programs, and more recently videocassettes. If Poul Tojner has stressed that unveiling the hidden meaning of a work of art is still the art critic's major task, interpretation does not mean communication nor education, and they do not require the same media. In the late forties or early fifties, the audience for modern art was still limited to small circles and the art critics were the only ones who had the knowledge and who had the power.

James Johnson Sweeney raised an issue which seemed to have become irrelevant in the eighties but which is back on the front page again : "In the world of art once a national interest succeeds in getting a foot in the door, or the liberty of the artist or the art writer is potentially menaced. This, I regret to have to confess, is a fact that we writers in the United States within the past year in particular have become painfully aware." The American Congress' hostile response to a travelling exhibition of American art in Europe called *Advancing American Art* was a baffling example of political censorship and J.J.Sweeney expressed his concern about the "attitude of official hostility to modern art". "I bring, he said, these conditions of the American climate before you primarily to stress the importance of maintaining the Association (i.e. the new born AICA) attitude towards its members as "individuals", not representatives of different nations, or different parties and the avoidance of national involvements". Was not the situation similar at the Biennale in Istanbul, last fall, when the American selection was threatened to be censored, as Kim Levin has reported.

A great deal of the discussions was devoted to the current battle between abstract art and representational art. While the articles which daily came out in newspapers and magazines were passionate and violent (sometimes to the extreme) the lectures at the conference were rather mild and ambiguous. They did not bring much light. Everyone kept a diplomatic reserve. And nobody mentioned a typical figure of the twentieth century art scene, the "fighter", the critic who shaped a group of artists and labelled it, who forged a body of theories as a set of decoding clues to read the art of the newcomers he wants to launch. At the beginning of the century, Marinetti had an in-built sense of provocation and mediatisation with an immediate international extension through his series of Futurist manifestos. In France, Guillaume Apollinaire and, later, André Breton tried to compete with him. At the time of the first art critics conference, Walter Pach, still glowing with the aura of the 1913 Armory Show, made

the trip to Paris but Clement Greenberg did not. Among the French new "crusaders" who showed up, Charles Estienne or Michel Tapié were surprisingly shy. 1949 was too early. Vanguard art critics set themselves up as leaders one or two years later.

We have to wait 10 years longer to watch Pierre Restany going even further. Restany introduced himself as the creator of artists. Regarding Yves Klein, he said "I think that what I brought him (...) was the opportunity to pin down through concepts and their labels the morphological units of his language. He needed that lexicological support. He used my words to construct his dreams'factory and his intuitions' laboratory." The same goes for Arman. Restany said he advised him to get out of the sheet of paper on which he was accumulating imprints of officials seals and "to extend his accumulative gesture to larger spaces". Retrospectively Restany defined himself as a visionnary. Michel Ragon put the question in 1961 : "Is the critic nowadays more creative than the artist he is supposed to support ? After Tapié and Alvard, Restany seems set to prove it." At least, the critic was considered as the artist's travel companion ("compagnon de route" was the phrase in French at the time). He was the guide who also made the break through. In 1972 in *Le Monde* daily newspaper, André Chastel pointed it up : "Innumerable recent movements, American or others, need the life-buoy of criticism. This provides not only the task of provoking in mental space the disposition, the hollow which will be receptive to the acceptance of a work of which impact is not obvious : it directly or indirectly furnishes the operator with concepts which must be exploited. Hence the genuine coupling of intellectuals and artists. This phenomenon will doubtless remain as one of the specific characteristics of our time."

A decade later, in his retrospective analysis of art criticism since Clement Greenberg, Donald Kuspit assigned the art critic a new role : more than the art historian, that unhappy pedestrian dealing with fact and documents, more than the philosopher limited in his conceptual logic, more than the artist himself blind to his own creation, the art critic is the visionnary who detects truth in art :

"The aim of art criticism is unveiling the truth in the unexpected collapse of appearances, even though modernity denies any presumption of truth. And Kuspit titled his book *The Critic is Artist* which echoes Oscar Wilde's formula *The critic as artist*. Even more than an artist, the critic is a philosopher of a superior sort "The art critic is a philosopher. In a sense his spirit is more unequivocally and profoundly philosophical-critical than that of the professional philosopher, whose recognition of the critical nature of philosophy is compromised by traditional demands of system building.

Indeed the conceptions of Lawrence Alloway, Joseph Masheck or Robert Pincus-Witten have become the means by which Art History assimilates

the art they deal with, showing that art criticism at its best is the innovating cutting edge of Art History."

As time flies faster and faster, as vanguards turn into historical movements the day after, the history of contemporary art is shaped as it is being built, before the historian has had the time to look back and untangle its meaning. If current epistemology often turns to the artist's intentionality to account for his art, it seems even more obvious that the critic's intentionality, be it overt or not, and the framework within which he expresses himself - institutional, polemical, promotional - determines the content of his criticism. The critic must be conscious of his own commitment to the work and to what extent this may have influence his opinion. Any aesthetic statement is conditional and conditioned.

In fact, has art criticism anything to do with truth ? Art criticism is not so much aiming for the truth of a work as for its own efficiency. In Restany's case, for instance, the critic's style with its excesses, its rhetoric more mystical than analytical, its combination of contradictory references and even incompatible concepts at times, gained attention and pointed up a phenomenon. The artists Restany called *Les Nouveaux-Réalistes*, even though they were so obviously different between themselves, had something in common : all of them were radically different from any other artist of the time. On the other hand the dynamism orchestrated around the world was a wonderful promotional instrument of the art market. And the artist's promotion was the instrument of the critic's promotion. Pierre Restany's main work of art is himself. To an almost unique extent in art criticism. In that respect, it might be viewed as paradigmatic. It is the reason why I dare call art criticism a "strategy". Its finality is its audience, dealers, the critic's peers, other artists, institutions, collectors or even the public. However, whatever its period or its type of approach, art criticism seems to have had a double effect of recognition and promotion : recognition of a phenomenon not perceived in the amorphous mass of artistic production, simultaneously with the first outlines of the criteria which will enable to point out the new phenomenon and to isolate it as an object for future analysis.

What about today ? The critic's role has developed in a parallel to that of the art market and it has followed its fluctuations and transformations. The gallery's place has been essential as part of the system within which art criticism circulates : the *Kahnweiler Gallery* for Apollinaire, *Cimaise* for Michel Ragon, *Art of this Century* for Clement Greenberg, the *Apollinaire Gallery* in Milan, *Colette Allendy*, *Iris Clert*, and *J. Gallery* in Paris for Pierre Restany. As far as the market is concerned, today consacrated values only still have a chance to survive untouched. I refer to Raymonde Moulin's book which came out in June 1992 *Art, Artists and Society*. Nowadays the institutions have taken over the first place and they

directly treat with the market. As Olga Schmedling wrote in the foreword to our meeting, "regardless of what the critic writes, the text's only status is gained through functioning as the mouthpiece for an exhibition, a gallery, a museum or any educational institution.". The active critics curate exhibitions. They work either for private galleries or for public institutions. Their role is very similar to that of museum curators. Or they are akin to artists'agents. They no longer are leaders in promoting aesthetic values. In that respect we would rather refer now to professional and highly mediated philosophers who tackle aesthetic matters more willingly than metaphysics. They write about artists in exhibition catalogues, art magazines and in their books (Deleuze or Derrida in France, for instance). They happen to be in charge of exhibitions sometimes (*Mémoire d'aveugle* by Derrida at Le Louvre in 1990) They are interviewed on TV about current exhibitions as Michel Serres frequently is in Paris. In the daily press or in weekly magazines art criticism is nothing but cultural journalism.

It has been

Should we say with Olga Schmedling that "the art critic is a relic from bygone times" ? We heard the answer through Kim Levin when she recalled that "the collapse of all the familiar criteria is only a crisis for those who are longing for old paradigms". The role of the critic has never been fixed. Today we are in the process of a shift from a paradigm to another, while networks are changing too, as well as the place of the critic in the system. Borges's metaphor in his short story "The Immortals" is clear about it : where there is no change there is no life.