

Criticism between social bubble and the public

International seminar Art Criticism – A public affair?

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Nowadays alongside ever more unfavorable conditions for criticism and its creators, found even in the broader critical discourse of the public, one almost can't escape polemics about the all present crisis in which the position of the critic and the whole field of different genres of criticism has found itself (even though criticism has been in crisis ever since the beginning of the 20th century, if one looks through history). As such discussing the crisis has become almost a mandatory topic on every symposium or seminar on criticism, and can be found even in intimate conversations between the critics themselves. The discussion on the crisis is also often accompanied by questions about the state of the critic's career (lowered pays, no job stability...) criticism itself (its role and status, which is becoming more and more marginalized), as well as social changes that impacted on the field of criticism (new technologies, growing passiveness of readers, neoliberal market, distinction between professional criticism and promotional material, etc.) As a literary critic and one of the organizers of an international critic's symposium *Art Of Criticism* (held in Ljubljana with focus on literary criticism) I myself take part in discussions on the previously mentioned questions, which often revolve in a circle without a final answer and possible solution for the future.

Because of my previous experiences with this topic, I was pleasantly surprised when I received the materials for the participants from the organizers via email (the Arts and Theatre Institute together with Arts Council Norway and with support from EEA/Norway Financial) prior to the international Art Criticism seminar. In it the participants for the round tables received the often repeated questions, together with very welcome recurring answers, which can be, truth be told, found too many times at similar events and debates, in the Czech Republic, Slovenia and elsewhere. In that way the organizers have thought out the foundation of the seminar in a good way, and enabled a possibility of a breakthrough to discussing the position of criticism nowadays. The one-day seminar was held on September 22nd 2017 in the spaces of the DOX Centre for Contemporary Art and mainly focused on the question of art criticism as a public affair. As such it didn't fundamentally differ from similar gatherings of critics abroad, but nevertheless showed, for me personally, some good attempts in how it was set up (by combining different forms of criticism and featuring a selection of panelists with various backgrounds in literature, theater, art, some were publishers, some authors, etc.)

The seminar program started in the forenoon and was firstly divided between presentations from invited Czech and foreign critics. Opened by Kateřina Kalistová as the Deputy Minister for Performing Arts from the Ministry of Culture of Czech Republic, who merely repeated the traditional topics of reflection on the artwork, as well as approaches and changes in the media. She quickly concluded that as a representative of the Ministry of Culture she believes that criticism is valuable in all art forms (and with that served more the protocol itself, as she also

“forgot” to mention any concrete activities the Ministry could offer to the endangered profession). The follow up by Petr Fischer, journalist and scriptwriter was far more convincing, as he tied criticism with the understanding of society by touching on some personalities from the past (Čapek, Walt Disney, Winston Churchill) and established it as a diagnostic tool for the arts (as well as its cure if needed). The contributions from the next three speakers Karla Hofmannová (Czech music critic from Brno), Sindre Hovdenakk (Vice-President of the Norwegian Critics’ Association, editor, literature and theater critic) and Natália Kovács (Hungarian PhD. Student, theater critic and cultural journalist) gave a welcome insight in the state of criticism in the Czech Republic, Norway and Hungary. The Czech critic began with some answers to the recurring questions by outlining the basic acts of criticism and foremost the problematic it encounters today in the Czech Republic (cultural management; the problem of media – a lack of space for critical reflection, the internet or moving criticism to a virtual space – which is accessible but also has its downfalls; criticism in struggle with PR; the smallness of the Czech cultural space, where everyone knows each other). In that way she unveiled quite some anomalies of the cultural system in the Czech Republic in depth, especially the disorder of the laws, directives driving cultural institutions to act according to market laws, not giving workers in the field of criticism enough recognition, a non-existent strategic support from the state, little to no regulation when it comes to copyright, etc. The Czech situation is quite bleak as it misses some of the basic regulations and laws that foreign critics (the author of this article included) have covered. On the other hand, the vice president of the Norwegian Critic’s Association presented a bit more optimistic situation, which as well is not completely immune to the pressures of the neoliberal market and quick social changes. The transformation of media shows in Norwegian criticism as well – in the last 30 years print media was reduced for 80%, which in turn affected on the space allocated to criticism. Another common trend is a shift towards internet (Sindre in a similar fashion as Karla saw the change as positive on one side, as it enables a democratization of culture and unlimited space, but also warned how cultural workers are in a way pressured to be present on social media, forcing authors of critics to take on the role of a “PR prostitute”). Even though the critical worker in Norway mostly works as a freelancer, Sindre Hovdenakk summed up the overall situation as bearable. The critic’s profession hasn’t changed drastically and is still desired as a creator of public discourse. Quite some magazines and newspaper still offer space for critical writing and maybe most importantly in the last few years there’s been a growth in funding of the criticism. Critics from Norway have access to over 10 various scholarships, as well as a privately funded initiative for free speech, which nevertheless speaks for some smaller advances from the status quo in many other countries. At the same time there is also some contradiction, as Hovdenakk said open and independent criticism in Norway is still of limited character if it’s not supported from external sources, which is understandable, as without financial support there would be no possibility for credible editors, as well as the space for criticism and its creators. To exemplify the mentioned anomalies the speaker quoted the Norwegian Minister of Culture, who said high culture is a thing of the past, and even puts funds towards sport as culture – which is a notable trend elsewhere as well, where culture is being forcefully popularized to meet market demand. The political problematic of criticism and the role of the state in cultural politics was most extreme (expectedly) in the Hungarian case. Natália Kovács presented the alarming situation of politics interfering with culture and criticism in the recent case of Hungarian theater criticism,

where state politics build an “alternative culture” through well situated individuals who have political power, distributing money to cultural institutions and media that act as an extension of the state. Others are left with little to none funds as critical thinking isn’t desired. Especially through this presentation, one can see how important it is to keep a critical discourse, finance it and enable its complete independence. One can also see how fragile the freedom of speech is in political hands, which will without a doubt have grave consequences in the Hungarian case, on generations of young critics as well as society as a whole (even though independent individuals and NGOs take care of educating younger generations). The panel of speeches from the aforementioned speakers outlined the various situations of the state of criticism in Europe well; showing how critical thought can be almost prosecuted (Hungary), some kind of a status quo (the Czech Republic) or having at least some improvements (Norway). Such presentations are vital in understanding and knowing what is happening in the broader space of Europe and different countries can learn from each other’s good and bad practices, and most importantly inform each other on the state of criticism elsewhere. The closing of the first section was marked by Suzana Jovaševićová (Centre for Foreign Assistance, Ministry of Finance of the Czech Republic) and Jan Hrdlička (Dep. Of EEA/Norway Funds, Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic), which was more or less just a formal closing of the first part of the seminar and was meant as an overview of projects funded from the EEA/Norway Funds up until now with hopes to continue with the good collaboration.

The second section of the seminar brought round tables in English and Czech language (2 Czech and 2 English speaking tables), with which the organizers took good care for the international and domestic guests. The selection of the participants was varied as well, as the tables featured authors, journalists, critics, scholars and the debates were led by moderators in sense of a workshop, accompanied with a notes keeper. I as a critic was part of an English speaking table, where besides presenting the situation in our home countries and our previous experiences, we wanted to look for the problem points of criticism as well as trying to find some solutions. The workshops were well thought out as they were conducted in two parts, the first before the break was dedicated to a discussion, and the second to an active search for solutions for functioning of criticism. However, if the diversity of the invited guests at the tables offered a plurality, the same diversity featured a problem in that different genres of criticism opposed each other since each faces different challenges, which resulted in individuals not understanding one another to a certain point. This was especially seen towards the end of the seminar at the presentation of the output of the round tables, where the moderators presented conclusions to the ongoing discussions. Still they quite traditionally revolved around questions of what is criticism, who is the critic and who the recipient of criticism, social media (yes or no?), adapting to the current crisis situation (maintaining professionalism or making the critique more accessible to the reader?), where the participants opinion often differed. Such a result is common for similar events, however most converged in problems like necessity of additional funding, education, editorial work, opening new connecting platforms and an open, democratic dialogue. Because of that, the closing revolved mostly around the fundamental connectedness of art with criticism, preserving its role and the necessity for connecting and an engagement to seek answers to challenges in international space. In that way the concept of the seminar and the want to overcome already seen and used

themes only succeeded partially regardless of the efforts on part of the organizers. For that sake, it would make sense to think over the way the panels and discussions are structured, maybe form them based on genres of criticism, as that would enable establishing answers to particular problems first (in literature, theater, art...) and then seek for a connection between the different genres, what would at one hand enable a plurality of viewpoints, whilst also promoting more homogenous, concrete results.

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