

What Are We Talking About, When We Talk About Criticism in the 21st Century? - Art Criticism and Citizenship

What do we figure
I think
Our words, they are signs

A century starts. Ours, the century we are living in, and that is the twenty first since centuries begun, is said to have started with two planes hitting towers in New York City, on September 11, 2001, with violence and screens, reality bursting into fiction in a way reverse to any previous order. Miriam Cahn¹, in a show held at Jocelyn Wolf, Paris, in 2020, found a way to articulate the change.

when i see the nonchalantly smoking female soldier who is walking a prisoner on a leash and looking at him with a disparaging smile i see after the first dismay caused by revulsion valie export walking a man on a leash through the streets of vienna. if in a film I see the world trade center in the background, i automatically switch my mind to attack and the collapse of the 2 towers and think at the same time of my own earlier works.²

Growing up in the 20th century was growing up in dreams and screens. In the 21st, our memories are projections that superimpose themselves with the extremely morbid context our daily life confronts us to. If the event that launches the 21st century indeed is 9/11, then it must be seen as coming after capitalism, after colonization, after communism, after WWI, after WWII, after Shoah, after Gulag, after Cold War, after Tchernobyl, after 1968 and 1973, after dictators in Latin America, in Africa, in the Est, after those of the West. It comes after democracy, after liberalism, after Europe, after Hollywood, nearly after the Silicon Valley, Steve Jobs and Bill Gates. It thus comes after WWF, Médecins Sans Frontière, Amnesty International, BRAC, Seva, The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation... Right into perpetual apocalypse. Still, if the 21st century opened as dramatically as said, and is in a state of looming catastrophe, one of the global specificities of the past 21 years is their constant ego bullshitery. Artwise, our century is a quote – be it of Deleuze, Barthes, Haraway, Latour, Sloterdijk, Brecht, Mishima, Freud, Eisenstein, Marx, Goethe, Despentés, Sartre, Shakespeare, Lucretius... in search of an opinion. Everything working as if the field (market) of art was a big machine turning craving egos into legit actors on the front stage of the world. Meaning: they do and think and say for themselves.

An art critic today, in short, is one of two things: a journalist, Anna Wintour or Arnaud Laporte, sharing content, feelings, a vector to the art market's storytelling, or an academic, related to the world of ideas, quotes and complexity. Two reasons behind which it is easy to hide when addressed with the problem of the reader: none of the two figures evoked are supposed to be read. The journalist fills blank spaces, the scientist, doctor, fills (dusty) shelves. Of course, sometimes, art criticism is related to words one reads – be it Hugo, Huysmans, Baudelaire, or John Berger. And when one relates to those words, one remembers

¹ A Swiss figurative painter with exploratory processes, such as performance or installations. In 1984, she represented her country at the Venice Biennale.

² <https://miriamcahn.com/torture-pictures-in-may-2004/>

how vehement, in a political way, art criticism has been. Of course, this statement is outrageous and unfair, let us just use it as a starting point.

Do we write in times, is a work of art contextualized, are we related or submitted in any way to the moment in which we appreciate those things that we see? What is there to write about?

2017, Claire Fagnard, Lecturer, Department of Visual Arts, Paris 8 University, publishes *La critique d'art*, Paris, éd. Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, coll. "Libre cours". The book deals with the specificities of art criticism nowadays. It is one of those books for shelves, yet it addresses an important question: if up until now art criticism had to do with observing specific works of art in order to discuss the field in which they act as agents, today, the question has to do with the how and why institutions show, what they show, the conditions in which the shown artefacts are shown (moneywise, technically, etc).

The following essay is to read as an attempt at giving a glimpse of different ways in which one writes or thinks about art. The question will then be where and how this writing is art criticism, what kind of posture or action 21st century art criticism is.

THE CONTEXT

“People are dying!”³

Congresswomen Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez gave an impassioned speech during a committee hearing in response to Republicans push-back on her climate change policy, the Green New Deal. ‘You want to tell people that their desire for clean air and clean water is elitist?’, she yelled. ‘Tell that to the kids in the South Bronx which are suffering from the highest rates of childhood asthma in the country ... You’re telling those kids that they are trying to get on a plane to Davos? People are dying!’

reports The Guardian, on March 27th 2019 – *impassioned*. The words themselves, the truth they name don’t affect us. Logic is not enough. The world, the American congress itself, needs passion. The speaker needs to be outraged, out of order (reality bursting into fiction), a character, he or she needs to be acting in a close to baroque way, to get (our) attention. “their desire for clean air and clean water”: we need to figure the extreme, that of a world deprived of air to breathe and water to drink, a world that kills, in order to change. Worse, everything looks as if we (listeners, electors, inhabitants, people) need or want to hear the horrible description of a lethal future, as we do daily, for the thrill. Addicted to the dopamine rush, first reaction our brain triggers when confronted with anything shocking, our collective understanding of the world is that of a junkie. “The universe can come to an end, as long as there’s some adventure⁴.”

THE SHOW

³ <https://youtu.be/zGtuDCZ3t2w>

⁴ <https://nypost.com/2020/10/08/trump-says-green-new-deal-will-make-us-a-ninth-world-country/>

In 2021, Anne Imhof *takes hold of the entirety of the Palais de Tokyo to create an all-embracing, polyphonic work*⁵. Glass walls reenact a dispositive used by the French police to tame crowds during demonstrations. They serve as a non-distorted, see-through house of mirrors. In the basement, one of them is sprayed as if a street wall, as if a statement: “Steve”, “Steve”, “Steve” covers one of the wall-windows that guide the spectators through the maze. Spectators in a certain state: turned crazy by the endless wait outside the gates of the concrete castle, trying to understand a strangely inhabited exhibition that shows the work of thirty artists while being a concert while relating to the world of fashion while feeling nihilistically ice-cold while being set in the 2020’s and having a very 1990’s vibe⁶. Spectators like cows in a slaughterhouse, in a Temple Gardin hug box vision of the world. Spectators who see without seeing “Steve” calling. Steve, for those of French people concerned by police violence, relates to a young man, Steve Maia Caniço⁷, who died on the night of June 21st 2019, during the yearly “Fête de la musique”, in Nantes. Steve, perhaps also Steve Jobs, Steve for Stephen King, Steve Buscemi, my neighbor’s uncle Steve... Yet, Steve, in France, in a setting very close to that of crowds and demonstrations: a reminder of police brutality, of the negation of crime; the passing of a ghost.



A picture of the “Steve” wall, Palais de Tokyo, Paris, taken from my Instagram account.

⁵ <https://palaisdetokyo.com/en/exposition/carte-blanche-a-anne-imhof-natures-mortes/>

⁶ 1990’s being the post-modern years described by Frederic Jameson in *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 1991

⁷ https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Affaire_Steve_Maia_Cani%C3%A7o

As an art critic, the show made me feel dirty. I saw the crowd and it reminded me of how I used to love bands such as Worlds Apart, The Spice Girls, Take That. How I didn't understand, at the time, why adults seemed so depressed with the idea music had come to an end, turned into an empty slot filled by disposable young people. Reality feeding fiction: music mattered less than the image of something that I can only now see as the coming to age of a generation, the Boomers' children⁸, those who would have to pay, who were the brainless payment, the amnesiacs. I say this because of Imhof, because of the show. I am trying to understand the meaning of what I saw: the power of the people, it's total nonsense. Anne Imhof, clearly no Patti Smith, made me feel how strong and frightening a crowd was, how zombie like it could be (rushing by dead Steve to see actors dressed and moving like models, revealing no truth, recreating a screen without the need for any technological device, thanks to the distance created by the faith or desire placed in them by us, servile drooling spectators looking for an answer). I realized Trump had been elected, Brexit had happened. I remembered "alternative facts", I thought of how Emmanuel Macron, French president, had been elected thanks to his desire to brake the poles of democracy, turning politics in a very cowboy like world of good and bad peoples, ideas, facts. I felt awful.

Most of the Parisian art aficionados loved the show. One of them, Samuel Belfond, hated it⁹: *« J'ai eu la rage devant la performance d'Anne Imhof au Palais de Tokyo parce que j'y ai vu une tentative de transformer l'énergie d'une génération qui est en partie la mienne – son désarroi, ses doutes, ses combats, ses nuits – en pâture esthétisée, en parade fataliste. »* I remember at the time feeling that if this was what the institution had to show us, artwise, it would have to be without me. On the other hand, I had also heard Jacqueline Eidelman, responsible of the "Musées du XXI^e siècle" mission¹⁰, saying surveys proved it: people visit museums for educational reasons. They want to learn. In which case Imhof's way of teaching instantly became my favorite: witty, cynical, hopeless. Yet I know those who want to learn go to the Louvre. Those who like me go to the Palais de Tokyo, they already know.

Even though part of me agrees with Belfond, his critique only starts addressing the problem. His expression of anger brings me satisfaction, soothes the frustration I feel at being targeted. He belongs, being of the generation depicted by the (cynical) show, he feels reduced to an element composing the still lives Anne Imhof depicts and sees nothing but complacency in the German artist's proposal. Yet, the expression of his anger, and his mention of a few very vibrant and lively projects in opposition to the show, sound like a cry rather than a thought (sending us back to Ocasio-Cortez).

The show brought the question of the looking glass to its extreme, turning the spy's one-way mirror into a no-way mirror. For nothing is to hide, there is no other side to go to for spectators so obsessed about being that looking has apparently become an overwhelming effort (picture the crowd running from one side of the gigantic exhibition to the other, through the glass maze, while you read this; try to imagine what each of them sees when the multitude is packed around a phenomenon). The immediacy of the mirror isn't actual enough for us, our gaze desperately turning everything it lays its eyes upon as past, thus dead, uninteresting. Not

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Generation_X

⁹ <https://yaci-international.com/fr/anne-imhof-faire-partie-du-probleme/> "I was infuriated by Anne Imhof's performance at the Palais de Tokyo because I saw it as an attempt to transform the energy of a generation that is partly mine - its disarray, its doubts, its struggles, its nights - into an aestheticized pâté, a fatalistic parade." Samuel Belfond being one of the major French figures of "Jeunes Critiques d'Art" – YACI International Young Art Criticism.

¹⁰ <https://www.culture.gouv.fr/Espace-documentation/Rapports/Rapport-de-la-mission-Musees-du-XXIe-siecle2>

even us. Reflection, transparency: the eye (I) burns so it can't linger. The function of the mirror stage is to establish a relationship between an organism and its reality.¹¹ Anne Imhof's show is impossible to relate to. And it pushes so far the question of the mirror, that it becomes over efficient (what happens to Samuel Belfond is nothing less than an overdose of his *imago*).

So much more could be said about the show, at a time where Boomers are aging, where youth is so threatened (by a horizon of fires, floods, and aging parents), so desired and despised. How, if the exhibition is about the interrelation between seeing and being, it also is about the crowd of our 21st century, a pack composed of individuals whose incredible strength comes from the absence of any binding agent – thus depicting what is at stake on social media. And obviously, it is a nasty show, born in the brain of a cold-blooded fashionista belonging to the world she criticizes, so deeply plunged in self-loathing something about her is unbearable. Obviously also, there is no other to be seen.

THE OTHER

Something quite clear in these times of screens: everything is accessible to the eye (comes to the I), to the point it doesn't need to move and becomes fat of a boring regime, seeing a framed world, convinced the dimensions of time and space resemble that of school, home and industry. The crisis revealed here may seem outdated, extremely occidental, contemporary, white, rich. Yet, something about it is universal: the language in which it expresses itself is of the possessor, and the possessor still is in power. Still has the power, the responsibility of very concrete disfunctions. We, the writing I and the reading you, also are on the responsible side, despite being alone and powerless. Psychotics are sometimes said unable to recognize themselves in the mirror. What they don't recognize, or don't see, is their otherness, as if the difference that is theirs wasn't part of the frame of society. As if the world could choose its minorities. Here, a few books could be mentioned as reassuring shores – *L'Ange Noir de l'Histoire. Cosmos et technique de l'Afro-futurisme* (Frédéric Neyrat, Editions MF), *Noirceur. Race, genre, classe et pessimisme dans la pensée africaine-américaine au XXI^{ème} siècle* (Norman Ajari, Editions Divergences), *Cavalier d'Epée* (Pierre Chopinaud, P.O.L.) published the same year (2021), in a similar attempt to displace the center of the world, to brake and hate the world, to build horizons where it isn't always the same poor figure at the center of the picture. Even 2022 is already a haven, since *Why Art Criticism?* Beate Söntgen and Julia Voss, eds. (Hatje Cantz), reestablishes the vital other at the center of Art Criticism (placing time in the face of the actual).

The exercise this text has been aims at emphasizing the locus of Art Criticism, a gesture rather than a posture, a voice that is neither of the artist nor of the institution, thus on the outskirts of the endless hic et nunc of market and screens, a displacement, a something else, another always other. Counterpoint to both the creator and society's voices, the critic draws lines, enhances melodies.

¹¹ « The function of the mirror stage turns out to be a particular case of the function of the imago, which is to establish a relation of the organism to its reality, or, as we say, of the Innenwelt to the Umwelt. » *Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je telle qu'elle nous est révélée dans l'expérience psychanalytique*. Jacques Lacan, Communication faite au XVI^e Congrès international de psychanalyse, à Zürich, le 17 juillet 1949.

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