

Sub/Dom Dynamics of Art (&) Criticism

Tags

#art criticism

#performance

domination

#submission

During a recent panel on whether or not art criticism can be regarded as an artistic format I reminded myself of a fantasy I'd had as an aspiring Comp. Lit. student contemplating possibilities of future employment for the utterly unpragmatic. At the time I'd had an almost cartoonish vision of my possible career as critic, jaded and feared, holding the faith of performance productions at the tips of my fingers. I would be a strict, but benevolent queen. Of course, a lot had changed during my years of study, much demystification and disillusionment took place as well as new understandings of my own investments and responsibilities, but in a cruel twist of faith, I got exactly what I had wanted in that I became a performing arts critic. Only it looked and felt nothing like my teen dominatrix fantasies.

Mostly underpaid and with never enough work for a person to actually be dedicated to criticism as a career per se, the work is always a side-job, almost a masochistic hobby, balancing between journalism, academic theory, and, frustratingly, PR. In the context of contemporary media and post-internet modes of communication, the conventional criticism seems anachronistic and is in many ways becoming obsolete, and while there is a growing interest in forming new modes and formats for discursive reactions to various artworks, a lot of critical practice remains woefully conventional and uninspiring. And remaining a marginal occupation for most who do engage in criticism, with limited space for publication and hectic schedules dictated by precarious working conditions, criticism has little chance to evolve. And if we are interested in creating more exciting ways in which to discursively engage with artistic practice, it's hard to escape the feeling that our hands are tied, and not in a fun way.

At the same time, I'm haunted by the more or less latent animosity between artists and critics, what I perceive as a reciprocal and simultaneous feeling of superiority and inferiority, permanently seesawing between the two illusory positions. Criticism is regarded as invasive, parasitic, even hurtful and cynical, especially when the general judgment of a piece is not unequivocally positive. As part of the documentation and archival trace of an ephemeral practice, it bears the responsibility as testimony of

a piece, as well as of its reception in the particular moment of its performance. When I'd started writing about art, I'd immediately started feeling the weight of responsibility to take into consideration the heterogeneous audience, the artists' vision, labour, and working conditions, the dynamics of the cultural field with its politics, and the editorial constraints of the publications I work for. There was nothing sexy about being a critic; very little freedom and no sense of power came from this cluster of exigencies that encapsulated my work.

Still, during a naked discussion I've had recently with a lover who is an artist about the general relationship between critic and artist, we both felt that the other side held more power and social standing and couldn't reach agreement on who is the oppressed in the given dynamic and who should be, well you know, punished in our micro-pseudo-class struggle. The truth is that both positions are simultaneously privileged and de-privileged, not only in relation to each other but also in the broader socio-cultural context; both are elitist and precarious, and while the tension between them cannot be pinned-down, it could be productive in various ways.

Contemporary higher education in the artistic field (especially in visual and performance art and new media) is heavily infused with theory and criticism; artists are trained to be able to incorporate theory into their practice, to articulate a discourse around their work in a way that can receive an academic seal of approval. The trend is not in itself good or bad, but as an imperative to engage with theory by all means is often non- or counter-productive, as well as sometimes completely unnecessary. However, the need for an active cross-over practice, a multifaceted exchange, is definite.

At some point, I've considered applying for an MA in New media art, thinking how it could be interesting to see how my training in theory and criticism could interact with a more practical practice, what I could learn from navigating the field from a different perspective. But then during an informal chat with one of the professors on the Department, I was told: "Ah, yes, theorists sometimes *think* they can make art." Which is fair enough, I guess we do, but I couldn't quite see why this was said to sound almost offensively ridiculous. Also, I wondered, is the sole purpose of studying art at a progressive experimental programme to become an Artist? The implicit hierarchy that places the Artist on an (utterly un-glamorous) throne seems confining, frustrating, potentially painful for art students who can only perceive success in terms of full-blown artistic self-realization. The professor also made a point in telling me that she teaches her students how to read and write theory so that they can intersect and even intercept critics writing about their work. Which is, again, fair enough, but the hostility threw me a little, I felt hit below the belt. I'm more than willing to wrestle it out, but I feel we need some rules of engagement, maybe even a safe-word to explore our boundaries.

In *Aliens & Anorexia*, Chris Kraus writes about the theatricality of S/M sexual practices, comparing the positions to commedia dell'arte characters¹, but I'd argue that as much as there is a theatricality to kink, there is a kinkiness to performing arts, least of all the obvious exhibitionist/voyeuristic givens of the performance situation. The power and vulnerability ambivalence of the performer's position is reflected in a similar affective experience in the audience; the fragility of the work relies on both sides balancing their power and powerlessness, domination and submission. And as for the critic, besides being the "expert" or especially engaged recipient of the work of art, the critic is potentially the most affectively open, most vulnerable as well as the most threatening person in the audience. At least if they're doing it right.

I deeply respect the work and vulnerability inscribed in each work, but I also take into account the power of the position of speaking on stage, and how this power is used. While we're trying to emerge from the exclusive and exclusionary tradition defined by patriarchy, racism, classism, all kinds of discriminatory normativity, we need to be able to come closer and move more freely. Invading elitist spaces, finding ways to disperse theoretical knowledge and, more importantly, theoretical *thinking*, as well as negotiating what we do with the platforms we inhabit is incredibly important. But as we give it our best shot, it is also significant to acknowledge and accept that there is no absolutely right way to do this, and it is never clean, only dirty. Generally and historically speaking, art is dirty, and performing arts are filthy, and the only way to engage is to get in each other's faces, gloves off, but with certain regard to the ambivalence of power in the roles we play. Kraus' analogy only gets us so far and in fact there is little truth to the idea that positions are fixed and boundaries clear when it comes to kink and art and criticism, and the more we fail to see this, trying to stay clean only makes our work impotent.

Basically, we all need to learn to switch.

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curating
in
context



Funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

¹ Kraus, Chris *Aliens and Anorexia*, Tuskar Rock Press 2018.; the paragraph is also published as part of a story "Emotional Technologies" in the anthology *Kink: Stories*, ed. R.O. Kwon and Garth Greenwell, Simon & Schuster, 2021.