

The impact of the digital revolution art criticism

Report of an afternoon debate in De Balie (Amsterdam), December 9, 2009

by Geert Lovink

I slow-blogged at the Day of Art Criticism the first session of a two-part event organized by the [Dutch AICA chapter](#), the professional society of art critics. Our Institute of Network Cultures was one of the many co-organizers (the evening part dealt with the decline of art criticism in Dutch newspapers). The introduction by Maria Hlavajova dealt with the impact of technologies on our private or professional lives, twenty years of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the invention of the World Wide Web. And the death of the art critic... just Google the term. In that sense we have to frame the 'crisis of art criticism' as part of larger changes in society. The afternoon session was dedicated to 'new media' as a possible solution, or actual problem, for art criticism to stage a come-back (see #dvdkk on Twitter).

Regine Debatty of [We Make Money Not Art](#) began her presentation by saying that she was a a blogger, not an art critic. This is interesting identity politics. Are art critics only those with an art history degree plus institutional affiliation? Only recently people started advising her to use this professional label. For Regine the blog is just a tool. Why do people associate blogs with terms such as impressionistic, subjective and populist, Regina asked. Art Forum is. Art Review is. They have gossip sections. The art world is getting used to blogs. It is remarkable that people start to see blog writing as a style. It certain has a quality in itself, if you look at [Jonathan Jones' Guardian blog](#). Regine often gets the request: "Can you write in the style of your blog?". She then discussed blogs such as [trendbeheer](#), the changes at Rhizome and their [Writers Initiative](#), Artworld Salon and the rumors on [Artfag City](#) who all can be controversial. Fashion bloggers are now also respected and are no longer marginal. On Facebook, which Regine recently joined, she follows Artinfo. On her blog Regine is always nice, and only writes about what she likes. She does not practice negative criticism and being provocative. The blog does not really ask questions. There is lots of traffic, with few comments. "If it crap why talk about it?"

[Cordula Daus](#) of the [Documenta 12 Magazines](#) team gave a presentation of the project. It brought together 95 magazines that have their own audiences, small academies, laboratories, located forms of knowledge. The aim was not to create a text machine. The project was working with, and through Documenta. In the centre was the collective editorial office, publishing a

'magazine of magazines' out of 300 contributions consisting of indirect responses, as a parallel event. In July 2007 the 'pixel and paper' event took place in Kassel. For magazines, the question of 'new media' seems to be a pragmatic one: how to pay the bills. It is no longer a fundamental debate of paper against the internet.

According to Dutch media theorist Arjen Mulder who works for V2 in Rotterdam as an editor and book publisher, paper equals rigor. In a time when people no longer have to make a choice between paper and digital, the question becomes how to maintain (or achieve) quality. The surprising answer here is: through the artificial limitations of print. Paper is a natural filter. After a period of post-1989 confusion there is now a Return of the Grand Narrative: the Networks. In this open, ever-changing system, what is necessary is a "coherent set of connections." The book helps us in this because it materializes order, a 'bezielde verband' as it is called in Dutch. Books create a larger order (and do not need ever-changing, expiring URLs).

The last presenter was the North-American art critic Jennifer Allen who has been based in Berlin since 1996. She works for a variety of magazines. In Germany Allen writes regularly for the magazines Zitty and Monopol as well as for the newspaper Die Sueddeutsche Zeitung. Ellen confirms that the current trend is one of less and less money for art critics. The According to Allen art criticism has turned ego-centric, celebrity driven reporting, now dominated by amateurs. It started with artforum.com and then turned to the magazine itself with its Seen and Heard rubric. Serious art criticism, published as a book, becomes harder because, for instance, the press no longer covers book lecture tours. Magazines have lost their audiences to online editions. Ellen: "Writing for the online world marks you for life and reduces your income to one third." Another problem is increased speed. Recently the feature film Brūno was killed because of bad tweets during the opening night. After that people basically no longer showed up at the box office. Another issue is the lack of authority. Blogs and Twitter might be popular but they have not taken over the position that leading magazines once had. They do not take up an alternative position. Why not take on Christies, Artforum, the bienales and the curators? On the net there is often no response, concluded Ellen. Online reviews do not gather opinion. They do not take up renegade positions and do not change the (rotten) power structure of the contemporary arts world that is too elitist.

The debate illustrated a few trends. Art criticism has entered the informal

networked media age. There is no way back. As a consequence, the personal style has taken over from the formal language of theory. People who still discuss how to relate art criticism and new media in some near future missed the boat. We're already there. As Jennifer Ellen pointed out, art criticism, be it online or in print, is failing to convince society of the relevance of the arts. "We fail to communicate the excitement and passion we have for culture." Young people know so much about running shoes and cell phones, she observed. "Why not look at art as we look at cell phones?"