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Art history as art criticism?*

Whenever one tries to think about the essence of art history, the question of judgement inevitably comes to the fore. But what kind of judgement is it? Is it the Vasarian type plotting the rise and decline of values, the avant-garde search for transgression or the post-modernist principle of multiplicity? What is the relation between the apparent objectivity of the collecting of facts and figures and its inherent structures of evaluation? And finally to what extent is art history able to formulate judgements and to what extent are they conditioned on the one hand by art criticism and on the other by contemporary art?

When writing his seminal 'History of Art Criticism' in 1936, Lionello Venturi set standards for discussions on these issues. He emphasized the crucial role of judgement in art history. For Venturi, art history was overly dominated by the neo-positivist approach, meaning that 'the historical facts, placed in series, even if most exact, lost their significance to the human mind, except to erudite curiosity, because interpretation of their aesthetic value was neglected'.¹ For Venturi the crucial problem was, in fact, a lack of awareness that judgement was necessary. As a result, he said, history of art improvised its judgements instead of seriously and profoundly discussing them. Venturi was also convinced that in order to achieve judgement one has to move between the boundaries of art history, art criticism and aesthetics. On the other hand, art criticism which is based only on intuition without any knowledge of theory is also blind. To quote Venturi again, 'if a fact referred to is not considered as a function of judgement, it is perfectly useless; if a judgement does not rest upon a knowledge of the historical facts, it is completely false'.² Finally, attributing such a crucial role in art history to judgement, Venturi said 'the history of art is a function of the criticism of art'.³

Venturi's ideas turn our attention to a crucial sphere in art history and should be re-examined. Above all they remind us of the role of judgement in our discipline. Since the end of art history was declared, art history has definitely changed its status and the scale of the problems it is willing to tackle. Even if some might find this development inappropriate it should be said that the new ideas have enriched art history to an unexpected degree. However, if we are to benefit seriously from these changes, we need to

request a judgement related to them. If art history is to expand and include new areas of study we need to know if the fields into which it expands are of any value. Even if we see the field of our study as a space which tolerates multiple occupancy, we need to distinguish between the occupants and their contributions to the field. Otherwise we could easily obtain a meaningless cacophony of no importance where crucial proposals go hand in hand with worthless suggestions. The pluralism of interpretations should not mean that all of them are equally viable. Such eclecticism would then signify support for a society without values or, worse, eventually for a society dominated by one value alone.

We know very well that judgements are conditioned by various contexts besides the social one, and cannot claim to be absolute. But at the same time they cannot be ignored. This applies to art history as a discipline as well as to an artwork, which does speak for itself. As Eric Fernie observed, 'the experience of works of art can be overwhelming to the extent that it is necessary to ask whether such powerful aesthetic responses could be summoned by any image whatsoever, given only the right suggestions and regardless of any characteristics of the object itself. When such positive responses are produced by particular pieces over generations it is reasonable to propose that this is due at least in part to something in the works themselves'.⁴

Judgement in art history is valid for discussions of the past but it is also valid for the present and for future developments. Since we have lost our belief in complete objectivity we have to admit that art history is of a narrative character. And as such it concentrates on the interpretation of facts, an interpretation which itself creates those facts. This situation has a profound impact on a variety of cultural spheres, but probably most directly on the contemporary art scene. Throughout much of the twentieth century, art consciously used the strategies of art history as one of its sources of inspirations. Although one should acknowledge the mutual influence exerted by contemporary art and art history on one another – this has been discussed in length by Hans Belting⁵ – I should like to emphasize the following issue: art historians tend to underestimate the importance of their judgements for developments within art itself, in all the various meanings of the word 'art', and within the domain of their discipline. On the one hand this has a short-term effect of allowing a mediocre or worthless production to be treated as art and, on the other, a long-term effect of destroying the criteria for judgement, be it of the past or the present.

Here, the connection between contemporary art and contemporary art history plays a crucial role. Contemporary art history is dealing with the phenomena which are trying to introduce new elements into the art discourse. Thus, art historians are encountering the problem of the definition of their field of study – what is art and what is not? Simul-

taneously they learn from contemporary art what art could be and what values should be discovered in the art of the present and of the past. In this respect art history could be called both a prospective and a retrospective discipline. When looking at the present it has to re-evaluate the past and at the same time set standards for the future.

But here precisely lies the greatest challenge for the discipline. When talking about contemporary art, art historians too often tend to follow the well-established path of art critics. As Ernst Gombrich noted, the art historian comes after the connoisseur and the art critic. Art historians usually do not question the canon of crucial events in contemporary art life as elaborated by the art critics. Yet they should allow themselves some kind of independence from their actual context and from contemporary art life. Those eager-to-find-something-new art historians who tend to follow the art critics in their judgements and write the most advanced art histories are just missing the principles of their discipline.

I believe that it is the art historian who should look carefully at the contemporary art scene and make judgements which are not oriented towards principles of 'here and now' but which try to take into account a wider spectrum of the variety of questions. Art history could then play a role in art criticism but, at the same time, differ from it substantially. As a discipline entitled to make judgements it should judge and should try to establish certain criteria according to which judgements could be made.

At the CIHA Congress in Amsterdam in 1996 Anca Oroveanu summarized the debates on these issues in a paper entitled 'The history of art shaping art?'.⁶ She showed the two extreme examples of this phenomenon in the twentieth century – socialist realism and post-modernism. In the first case, ideology used art history as a tool in order to extract from the past the visual language most adequate to transmit the new propaganda messages in an old form. This abuse of the discipline was generally brought about through totalitarian methods. On the other hand the post-modern arts fell under the tyranny of the history of art. Here Oroveanu finds the long-lasting influence both of the Greenbergian discourse and the critical discourse of the avant-garde concepts and presuppositions. These relations, as she says, 'are not necessarily and invariably liberating, but may be, under certain circumstances, limiting'. And since art history is the main bearer of specialized memory in the field of art, its memory and its structuring 'may act not only as a means of organising what would possibly remain, otherwise, a number of chaotic and disconnected objects and events, but also as a modelling factor'. Since art history structures the past, 'it also suggests how future facts of the same kind might fit in, and locates (even if implicitly) the contemporary artists into this scheme. In other words, art history deals not only with the past, which is, if one may say so, its "natural" object, but also, explicitly or not, with the future'.

If this is true, then the role of judgement is of fundamental value for the whole development of art. If we understand judgement as evaluation, the most difficult challenge would then be to establish the system of values relevant for such judgement. It would be too naïve to consider that it is possible in a straightforward fashion. An artwork is a complex structure and requires a profound study, without any *a priori* prejudices. And not everything could be expressed by means of the restricted possibilities of the written or spoken language. But at least one may learn from art history that there are some points of reference that should be taken into account when judging the artwork and that it does not have to entail going back to a transcendent and universal notion of quality. For instance, the method of comparative research has not lost its significance. At the same time the historical context is also a significant point of reference. We should also be aware of the fact that individual artists require individual approaches, even if within a larger context. And finally that aesthetics has for a long time ceased to be the only source of values and should be combined with other spheres of influence for the artwork, e.g. its motivated expression in political and social spheres. Although one may also ask if art is not losing some of its critical value when it is overly immersed in the current socio-political life.

By way of example I should like to point out the two-sided notion of originality.⁷ The critics of post-modern art refused to use it, as did the artists. The criticism of this notion stood at the centre of the post-modern approach to the traditions of the twentieth century and to the traditions of all art history. As such the critique was a conscious part of a larger and complex vision of contemporary culture. This does not mean that the notion of originality lost its relevance; indeed, I trust it could still be given a positive value. The concept of originality lies at the heart of art history and the constant changes in the arts. It does not belong only to the modernist utopia and serve only as a rejoinder to the post-modernist repudiation of it. Originality is a condition *sine qua non* for creativity. I do not see it as a return to the idea of progress in the arts, but as a constant opening up of new vistas for the arts. In this sense the post-modern questioning of the notion of originality was itself rather original and simply allowed us to understand originality much better. Originality seems to be particularly hard to achieve in the globalized world; nevertheless globalization, with its ongoing unification, could be the best stimulus for a return to originality.

Obviously it is not only art history which is able to judge. Art criticism plays a crucial role in shaping the current debate. It acts as a spectator with all its rights to give answers to the art works produced nowadays. But its major role is thus temporary and direct – art criticism does not have the wider perspectives of art history. Art history should differentiate itself from art criticism for the very reason of its historical background and

should look further for judgement. And it is precisely because of this, I believe, that art history also gives us the best insight into the most unusual experiments in the arts nowadays, particularly those which question the existence of art itself, trying to define art anew. One can accept the transgressions while knowing what to transgress and if the effect of the transgression is of any value.

Art history is challenged by contemporary art to make judgements. I believe that it is fruitful for it to shoulder this challenge and to perform the role of art criticism. And I trust this is also beneficial for art.

* Thanks are due to Professor Lech Kalinowski († 2004) for his help and advice, when writing this paper.

1 Lionello Venturi, *History of Art Criticism*, New York, 1964, p. 18.

2 Ibid., p. 20.

3 Ibid., p. 351.

4 Eric Fernie, 'Quality', in id., ed., *Art History and Its Methods. A Critical Anthology. Glossary of Concepts*, London, 1996, p. 357.

5 Hans Belting, *Das Ende der Kunstgeschichte*, Munich, 1984, and id., *Das Ende der Kunst-*

geschichte. Eine Revision nach zehn Jahren, Munich, 1995.

6 Anca Oroveanu, 'The History of Art Shaping Art?', in W. Reinink and J. Stumpel, eds., *Memory and Oblivion. Proceedings of the XXIXth International Congress of the History of Art*, Dordrecht/Boston/London, 1999, pp. 123–30. All the following quotations *ibid.*

7 Cf. Richard Shiff, 'Originality', in Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, eds., *Critical Terms for Art History*, Chicago/London, 1992, pp. 103–15.

Summary

The present paper raises the problem of judgement in art history and the relations between art history and art criticism. Referring to the seminal book by Lionello Venturi, 'History of Art Criticism' (1936), the author stresses the importance of judgement in art history. Judgement is needed to evaluate the current changes both within the discipline itself and within the arts. The mutual relations between contemporary art and art history are the focal point of the argument. The history of contemporary art, which very often tackles the problem of the definition of art, becomes a field of study strongly related to art criticism. Yet the language of art criticism dominates and art history usually follows the well-established intellectual categories elaborated by art critics. This is a misleading phenomenon. In fact it is the art historian who should look carefully at the contemporary art scene and make judgements. Although this kind of activity is always related to art criticism, it is the art-historical discourse which reaches beyond the current point of view, accepts the wider scope of problems and transcends the 'here and now' perspective. Therefore traditional categories in art history such as historical context or the notion of originality should be reconsidered. When writing contemporary art history, the art historian is at the forefront of defining the basic principles of his/her own scholarship and the very field of study: art.

