

# INTERNATIONAL LEXICON OF AESTHETICS

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## ART CRITIC

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It. *Critico/a d'arte*; Fr. *Critique d'art*; Germ. *Kunstkritiker/erin*; Span. *Crítico/a de arte*. In classical Greek language the adjective κριτικός (*criticos*) meant able to judge and could be a substantive too, referring specially to expert grammarians; in Latin *criticus* was also a designation particularly used for literary scholars. The origins of art criticism could go back to Antiquity as well, considering any kind of comments and assessments on artworks or art matters. Art critic, in a broad sense, could be anyone devoted to the exegesis and judgement of the arts and this has been the traditional assumption for centuries. However, our present nomenclature segregates this activity in three separate disciplines, emerged from a triple watershed developing since the Enlightenment: Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* is usually considered the founding treatise of the science devoted to philosophical essays on art; Winckelmann's *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* has often been honoured as the foundation of Art History; while Diderot was long revered as the first eminent critic of art for his reviews of the Salon exhibitions published by the journal *Correspondance littéraire, philosophique et critique*. Thus, art critics are, par excellence, authors reviewing contemporary art novelties. But the proper definition and shifting limits of this profession will still remain the object of heated controversy (Elkins 2003; Rubinstein 2006; De La Torre 2012; Fagnart 2017). There are two sides to every question and current debates on this matter could also be summarized in a twofold discussion.

### ART CRITICS AS OPINIONATED ESSAYISTS

The publication of newspapers or cultural journals and the existence of public shows of art have always been the catalysts for the flourishing of authors exposing their personal views on art novelties. Diderot was an early case, but many others followed suit and their influence as opinion makers has generally depended both on their own prestige and on the readership of the respective media. Indeed, art critics are popularly identified as journalists, and some of them have been famous writers: particularly in the nineteenth

century, when great poets and novelists tried to earn their living for some time with such essays; afterwards, many art critics have also pursued literary careers in parallel. They would often argue, as for example José Camón Aznar and Juan Antonio Gaya Nuño used to say, that art criticism should be considered a literary genre in its own (an idea later seconded by Jean-Luc Chalumeau and then by many others: Lüddemann 2004; Baneth-Nouailhetas 2005; Aguirre 2014). Sophisticated reflections expressed with a personal style can of course be enjoyed by future readers when the reviewed exhibitions or other art news are forgotten past; hence the demand for books compiling selected articles by literary ambitious journalists. But while creative writing can assure endurance for posterity it also has some drawbacks: exhibition reviews lack the scholarly references of scientific discourses, validated inasmuch as they rest on previous interpretations – quoted in footnotes or bibliography – and on new analyses duly endorsed by other prominent experts. Contrarywise, art critics rarely allude in their essays to other colleagues and are hardly ever quoted by their peers. Art critics do not necessarily see themselves as treading in the footsteps of their kindred, despite the long history of this profession which seems to be constantly reinventing itself (Guasch 2003; Carroll 2008; Barreiro, Díaz 2013; Lemaire 2018; Lorente 2020). Their practitioners have always been and continue to be decidedly subjective and personal. The extreme case of such idiosyncratic attitude are critics who lead an art tendency, ignoring or attacking others. Clement Greenberg, unyielding apostle of Abstract Expressionism, was the most famous example in the twentieth century, together with Michel Tapié as faithful sponsor of Informalism, or Germano Celant who would champion Arte Povera till the end of his life. Challenged by other artists and succeeding trends, many art critics who have passionately undertaken this task for a period in their lives then dropped it: e.g. Marta Traba, who turned to literature, or Michael Fried, who became historian of nineteenth-century art, etc.

#### AUTHORITIES IN CONTEMPORARY ART WITH A SHRINKING IMPACT IN THE ART WORLD

Being an unregulated task, art criticism does not exist as a formally established profession, whose practice is licensed by certain academic degree and policed by authorities or unions. Yet in 1950, the UNESCO encouraged the foundation of the Paris-based International Association of Art Critics (AICA, for its acronym in French), which has about 5,000 members from some 95 countries all over the world, organised into 63 National Sections plus an Open Section. After the General Assembly of 1983 held at Tampere, AICA does not accept candidates who only study the art of the old masters (Meyric Hughes, Tió Bellido 2010: 9). To be admitted, applicants must produce evidence of sustained activity in contemporary art criticism over the previous three years. On the other hand, eligibility for membership of AICA does not solely rest on writing texts: other activities such as broadcasting, curating exhibitions, public lecturing or university teaching are also taken into account. A multifaceted career, combining several of these profiles is the usual case. The enduring prototype of the academic scholar doubling as critic and curator of exhibitions is perfectly represented by Lisbeth Rebollo Gonçalves, elected president of AICA in November 2017, who is Professor of Art History at the University of São Paulo, where she has been director of the Museum of Contemporary Art. However, for younger generations the tendency seems to become freelance critics/curators (Szántó 2002; Bordolotti 2003), following on the footsteps of Harald Szeemann,

who set a different professional standard: he would not write articles reviewing the artworks or exhibitions of others but provided his vision of contemporary art through the shows he organized and in the texts of their respective catalogues. He was one of the founding members of the International Association of Curators of Contemporary Art (IKT, by its German acronym) established in 1973, with headquarters in Osnabrück, that brings together both museum keepers and exhibition makers. The case of film critics associations is even more fragmented: following the model of the oldest, LAFCA, founded in 1975 in Los Angeles, they are usually local or national. In other areas there is an umbrella organisation, as the Association of Architecture Organizations founded in 2005. In any case, while specialists in all fields of contemporary art spread in number and visibility, their influence has declined. The so-called "Dealer-Critic System" sustaining the art world at the time of the Impressionists has gradually lost power in terms of social validation of art: the success of artists, artworks or styles is primarily dictated in the twenty first century by certain collectors and blue-chip art investors (Berger 1998; Birnbaum, Graw 2008; Khonsary, O'Brian 2010). However, other actors in the present art scene have taken on the mantle of criticism. "Institutional critique", originally a satirical anti-establishment practice by non-conformist artists, now pervades curatorship and even official speeches, especially in museums of contemporary art and university discourses about up-to-date art issues (Elkins, Newman 2008; Zuliani 2012).

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