The Conversation

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Two things are crucial for *Open!*, both in its previous and in its putative future form. The first is the problematisation of the category of art and the use of an extended notion of aesthetic practice; the second is the shift away from criticism to critique.

Critical thinking happens in groups; groups that need not be thought of as forming a particularly cohesive whole, with an ideology all subscribe to. If anything, the more productive groupings are held together not by consensus but by an informed dissensus, by a productive dissensus that propels the conversation (even if it can also make it difficult). These groups are assemblages held together by heterogeneity; but the heterogeneity is far from random.

If we are thinking of art criticism and art discourse, then it is obvious that the magazines and journals that function the best are based on discursive societies – to use a term by Tom Holert. These make focused conversations possible, with a minimum of white noise.[1] The same goes for other kinds of publications, for general critical reviews, or political magazines. If you are more or less part of several of these societies or assemblages, you start to notice how they modulate your thinking and writing, how they open you up to different intellectual possibilities. Open, with its critical focus on new media, the commons, and forms of social action, is a fairly unique and very valuable discursive context, which owes a great deal to its self-effacing editor-in-chief.

In the Netherlands, the Mondrian Fund – who is going to initiate a campaign to stop this organisation from abusing the artist's name any longer? – believes that criticism is superfluous. They seem to believe that one integrated art criticism website is enough; art criticism, after all, is a public consumer service, and it may just as well all be located in one place. Two things are completely unthinkable in this context, and as I see it, they are both crucial for *Open*, both in its previous and in its putative future form. The first is the problematisation of the category of art and the use of an extended notion of aesthetic practice; the second is the shift away from criticism to critique.

To begin with the second, and to quote Terry Eagleton: "*Criticism*, in its Enlightenment sense, consists in recounting to someone what is awry with their situation, from an external, perhaps 'transcendental' vantage-point. 'Critique' is that form of discourse which seeks to inhabit the experience of the subject from the inside, in order to elicit those 'valid' features of that experience which point beyond the subject's present condition".[2] This also means that critique doesn't know where to stop, and that it can never consist of the critic being content to judge artworks in accordance with certain criteria. As Howard Caygill puts it: "The critic must find the moments of externality within the work – those moments where it exceeds itself, where it abuts on experience – and to use them as the basis for discriminative judgment. Strategic critique moves between the work and its own externality, situating the work in the context of experience, and being in its turn situated by it". [3]

This type of critique may even do away with what most people would recognise as “a work” and instead focus, for instance, on the visual production and mythical wish-images of populist politics. Critique has a bad rep these days because of its adherence to the negative, but critique needs to be seen in conjunction with composition, as used, for instance, in Italian operaismo. Critique thus considered is not the activity of the lone critic judging a work of art in splendid isolation for an abstract newspaper audience, in a kind of caricature of Kantianism; rather, critique is conversational, a matter of shifting groupings and feedback effects within overlapping and unstable networks whose nodes may take the form of magazines.

The second point concerns the aesthetic in the sense of Jacques Rancière’s “aesthetic régime”. The aesthetic is the constant questioning of art and, more precisely, of claims for art’s autonomy, counteracting the tendency to reduce autonomy from persistent problem to a seemingly self-evident possession. From the Romantics onward, with all their attempts to reintegrate art into religion or create some kind of religion out of art itself, artistic practice emerges as aesthetic practice when it problematises the limits of art and artistic autonomy. The main goal of various twentieth-century avant-gardes was the “overcoming of art” – in the service of realising a ludic life that would effectively be a form of “living art”. The aesthetic thus understood always returns to haunt the circumscribed conceptions or forms of “autonomous art”. [4]

Today this avant-garde program looks like the product of a simpler age, but what remains is the urgent need for artistic or, more generally, aesthetic practices that constitute interventions in a rapidly collapsing global economic and ecological system. What remains is the need for practices that open up new avenues (or crooked paths) toward thought and action, for engagement with and within what is, after all, a common world. This does not mean an abstract negation or abandonment of art, nor of its institutions. Patient and so-called embedded critique is needed, yet moments of externalisation are also crucial. Thus, Brian Holmes’ essay on containerization *[www.onlineopen.org/do-containers-dream-of-electric-people]* in *Open* no. 21 was juxtaposed with stills from Allan Sekula and Noel Burch’s film *The Forgotten Space*, but the text never addresses that film directly: it is a parallel investigation rather than a critique of the film. [5] Of course it’s impossible to find “the right balance”, because there is no such thing—though if some magazines and journals tend to err on the side of an over-affirmation of art, *Open* has perhaps sometimes given it short shrift.

Open! has recently been forced into a new phase, which is no longer dominated by the production cycle of a print journal. This obviously has profound consequences; the medium may not be the entire message, but it is an active agent with an impact on what is produced and how it is produced. Different forms and temporalities can now be tried out, without the terror of print deadlines. Given the lack of money – that universal solvent – participants will also have to confront the constraints and strains resulting from their sometimes-conflicting roles in various institutional and extra-institutional settings with a new intensity. Somehow or other, the conversation will go on, but it will end up morphing in the process. You can’t step into the same conversation twice.

Sven Lütticken is a member of the editorial board of *Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain.* He teaches art history at VU University Amsterdam; is the author of several books, including *History in Motion: Time in the Age of the Moving Image (*2013); and writes regularly for journals and magazines including *New Left Review, Afterall*, *Grey Room*, *Mute* and *e-flux journal*. At the moment he is working on a collection of a essays under the working title 'Permanent Cultural Revolution,' and editing a reader on art and autonomy. See further: www.svenlutticken.org.

Footnotes

1. “Interview mit einem Vampir. Subjektivität und Visualität bei Jeff Wall”, in: tent. cat. ***Jeff Wall. Photographs***, (Wenen: Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, 2003), p. 140–152. In the original German, the term is Diskursgesellschaft.
2. Terry Eagleton, ***Ideology: An Introduction*** (London / New York: Verso, 1991), p. XIV.
3. Howard Caygill, Walter Benjamin: The Colour of Experience (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 62–3.
4. See: ***Open. Cahier on Art and the Public Domain*** no. 23, “Autonomy. New Forms of Freedom and Independence in Art and Culture” (SKOR / NAi Publishers, 2013).
5. Brian Holmes, “Do Containers Dream of Electric People?”, in: ***Open*** no. 21, ***(Im)Mobility. Exploring the Bounderies of Hypermobility***, 30–47. Allan Sekula & Noël Burch, "The Forgotten Space", in: Open no. 21, p. 47–64.

Crosslinks

Do Containers Dream of Electric People?: www.onlineopen.org/do-containers-dream-of-electric-people

Tags

Aesthetics, Art Discourse, Autonomy

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