

Editorial

What do academics, critics, and reviewers pay attention to when they write? With whom do they collaborate? Whom are they addressing with their writing? To what extent is their critical work financially remunerated? How does their writing achieve a balance between description of artistic productions and their socio-political, economic, historical, and theoretical contextualisation? And should they make it clear whether or not they actually like a performance?

With these questions we began our investigation into the contemporary practices of doing criticism in summer 2018 when we sent out an interdisciplinary call for papers for a *Platform* symposium. Our inquiry into the current practices of art, theatre, and performance criticism assembled in this issue is built and builds on the work of Anglophone and German-speaking visual art critics, theatre, and performance academics: in the 2000s a whole range of writing on criticism, spanning from literary critic Rónán McDonald (2007), to philosopher and film critic Noël Carroll (2009), to the art historian James Elkins (2003 and 2007), addressed the tension between a mode of descriptive reviewing, on the one hand, and of critical evaluation on the other. McDonald's book *The Death of the Critic* holds on to the critic's distinctive status and argues that:

[u]navoidably, the critic occupies a hierarchical role: someone who knows more about an artform than we do, whose opinion or interpretation is worthy of special regard [...] Evaluation of the arts has been dispersed, beauty emphatically ascribed to the 'eye of the beholder', not the expert critic or the aesthete. (2007, viii)

Continuing with his work on the state of criticism from 2003, where he claimed that 'descriptive criticism begs the question of what criticism is by making it appear that there is no question' (42), James Elkins recently

observed (2018) that art criticism

continues to avoid judgement in favour of description; it favors neutrality and praise despite the encroaching market; it imagines itself to be in perpetual crisis or decline; it attaches itself to many media and voices; and it has no central texts, practitioners, or problematics. (10)

Notably, Elkins made these statement before online publishing expanded radically and began to democratise the field of art criticism. A cultural shift that is still ongoing and subject of many of the contributions in this issue, which are thereby expanding the work of Gavin Butt (2004), Duška Radosavljević (2016), and the recent issue of the bilingual art theory/criticism journal *Texte zur Kunst* (published in German and English) entitled 'Performance Evaluation' (June 2018). While Butt explores questions of how art and performance criticism overlap and Radosavljević's edited volume focuses on how online publishing has had an impact on theatre criticism, the *Texte zur Kunst* issue 'Performance Evaluation' focuses on the performative qualities of reviewing practices on online platforms, especially on social media.

We perceive of the socio-political roles of criticism as more than mere translations of works of art and performances into words, which describe and perpetuate the very value systems within which operate. Therefore, we want art criticism to actively challenge pre-existing socio-political and economic moulds, distinctions, and hierarchies. In this view, we organised a one-day symposium at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama in November 2018, which assembled scholars and practitioners from the UK. Postgraduate and early-career scholars from the UK, the US, Germany, Austria, Poland, and Canada discussed the politics and technologies of contemporary review writing, considered to what extent reviewing implies *doing* criticism and explored the embodied experiences of performing criticism.

Alongside the paper presentations, the symposium featured a keynote lecture by Sabeth Buchmann, professor of Modern and Contemporary art at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, to which Dr

Duška Radosavljević responded by picking up on the tensions between the quantification of critical evaluation and expanded agencies for non-professional audiences. A final roundtable discussion featuring the dancer and choreographer Hetain Patel and dance critic Sanjoy Roy, moderated by Dr Diana Damian Martin, provided a glimpse into the difficulty of navigating an ongoing and personal/professional relationship between critic and artist. This issue reflects the wide-ranging contributions made on this day by emerging academics and practitioners and carries the multiple conversations forward. Additionally, it was also important to us that the printed issue included the voices of those who, due to political or financial reasons, could not attend the symposium in person. This issue of *Platform*, thus, features perspectives on criticism from various countries in Europe and beyond, from scholars and students at various stages in their career.

The articles in this issue travel from personal introspection via critical dialogues between artist and critic to critical practices in and for larger groups or communities. The first two contributions feature historical case studies and offer a way of situating contemporary artistic criticism in larger historical movements and contexts. In the essay ‘Theatre as Creative Failure: Simone Weil’s *Venise sauvée* Revisited’, Thomas Sojer considers what it would mean to develop an individual and introspective critical stance in light of political and journalistic oppression. Against the backdrop of the Third Reich, Weil develops a specific mode of introspection, a closet drama, based in the theology of the early Christian church, which gives Sojer the opportunity to ask where critical reading and writing practices begin and at what point they can legitimately be called criticism. His essay also makes an important contribution to the study of the ‘théâtre résistant’, a term which was coined after WWII, to warn against historically revisionist narratives of theatre, criticism, and resistance to censorship.

Hannah Bruckmüller’s art historical contribution, entitled ‘*Cli-je*: Subjectivity and Publicity in Art and Criticism’, expands on the question of criticism as an institutional practice. The Letters of Pierre

Restany and Marcel Broodthaers in *Court-Circuit*, reflects on the entanglements of visual and letter-based artistic and critical production. Reading the exchange of letters between artist Marcel Broodthaers and as critic Pierre Restany, Bruckmüller performatively examines the *clichés* of the artist-critic relationship in the art world of the 1960s. She asks, how such a socially reciprocal relationship between critic and artist can be re-evaluated against the backdrop of the socio-economic mechanisms of the art market.

Transitioning to a more contemporary perspective and broadening the conception of criticism to include a wider public, Sabeth Buchmann's article 'FeedBack! Performance in the Evaluation Society'—a continuation of her contribution in the *Texte zur Kunst* issue (June 2018)—discusses the contemporary evaluation techniques applied on social media. Reading a feedback-based performance practice from the postmodern dance of the 1960s against Anne Imhof's performance *Faust* presented at the 2017 Venice Biennial, Buchmann observes that contemporary art criticism is uncomfortably implicated in the very systems of discipline enforced by the logic of constant evaluation that it seeks to critique and reflect upon.

Similarly, Katharine Kavanagh's article 'Criticism within the Circus Sector: Redressing a Power Imbalance' contemplates the various publics contemporary criticism should strive to reach. Her piece surveys the current relationship between circus practices and their emerging academic and critical discourses. Finding a distinct disconnect between the way circus practitioners reflect on their practice versus how performance and theatre scholars have tended to treat the genre of circus, Kavanagh proposes a system that will enable a more nuanced discussion of circus as an art form and its multiple and complex potentials activating audiences and reaching different publics. She strives for a form of circus criticism, which will not only make the practice of critically writing on circus more relevant to circus performers themselves but illuminate circus's critical relevance to the wider field of performance studies.

Lastly, and with an eye to the future, Heidi Liedke's contribution 'In Appreciation of 'Mis-' and 'Quasi-': Quasi-Experts in the Context of Live Theatre Broadcasting' expands on the label of the artistic critic by considering what she calls 'quasi experts', who attend remote live-screenings of theatrical events and participate in the discourse about them via Twitter. In taking seriously these contributions as critical utterances, Liedke argues for a delimitation of expert in light of a growing lay culture and calls for a more socially inclusive definition and practice of a critic. Her essay puts forward the pressing question whether today's practices of criticism necessarily need to be thought of as a collective undertaking, distributed across various virtual and real-life communities.

The section 'Reports from the Field' brings voices of practicing critics into the scholarly discussion of criticism. Here they comment on what they see as problems in the way criticism is practiced today or offer small glimpses into their own critical interventions. Theatre critic Eylem Ejder provides a feminist insight into the difficulties associated with performing theatre and publishing criticism under the current political atmosphere in her home country Turkey. Showcasing two modes of performing feminist criticism, developed and practised by the author and a group of like-minded friends, Ejder demonstrates creative ways of engaging with different publics and circumventing certain restrictive publishing directives by drawing on fictionalisation and introspection. Ejder uncomfortably echoes Sojer's earlier contribution, which also engages with the realities of performing criticism in politically limiting circumstances.

An excerpt from Meghan Vaughan's zine 'All of the Art I Experienced from 1.11.18 to 8.11.18 (and How it Made me Feel)' features her de-hierarchical approach toward theatre criticism. Parts of it are reprinted here as the zine was distributed as a performative intervention during the day of the 2018 symposium. It features a review of all the cultural events Vaughan attended or consumed in the week leading up to the symposium. The zine's distinct 'Do-It-Yourself'-

character lends the format an informality that is still rare in artistic criticism. Her breezy and relatable tone mirrors her aesthetic choice and showcases a mode of performing criticism that is simultaneously engaging and critiquing, and contrasts inaccessible or elitist forms of writing criticism.

Michael Norton highlights the critical practices at play in programme selection by theatre directors, dramaturgy and curators by introducing his own system for aiding selection committees in embracing a less judgmental, and more vulnerable and open-ended method of selecting work to produce at their venues. Painted against recent programming scandals at the Whitney biennial or the Berliner Volksbühne, and inspired by the feedback giving process at the DAS Theatre school in Amsterdam, Norton proposes a system of evaluation and selection that gives room to minority voices and allows for a more nuanced discussion of the proposed work, which he calls ‘Vulnerable Selection’.

Concluding this section is Zofia Cielatkowska’s ‘Native Speaker: Art Criticism and Its Lingua Franca’, which makes a passionate case for a more multi-lingual approach to art and theatre criticism. Pointing out the many instances where English is seen as the lingua franca of the art world and pointing to possible discriminations that art critics from non-English speaking countries face in light of this need to converse in very specialised English, her essay draws attention to the many inequalities and social exclusions at work in the field of art and performance criticism today. She calls for a more reflective treatment of these assumed inevitabilities and revolts against the hegemony of the ‘native speaker’.

The self-referential and reflective qualities of the issue’s theme are also reflected in the performance and book reviews. In his review of his experience as an audience-participant and ‘jury member’ at *Raleigh: The Treason Trial* at the Globe, Alessandro Simari reflects on the critic’s complicity in perpetuating a societal status-quo in the theatre, and questions the emancipatory potential of participatory theatre.

Reviewing *The Twilight Zone* at the Almeida Theatre, the theatre-maker Anne-Louise Fortune weaves the economic realities of writing theatre criticism for online outlets into her analysis of the show, tracing the fast-paced, fleeting nature of online culture' in both. The featured book reviews engage with recently published volumes shining light on criticism from literary, pedagogical or theatre-practical perspectives. Amy Borsuk reviews the edited collection, *Shakespeare and the Urgency of Now: Criticism and Theory in the 21st Century*. The book comprises essays that cause the reader to understand that we critically engage with our pasts, always in relation to the now. Jaelyn Endris in reviewing *Critique and Postcritique*, an edited collection by Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski that primarily focused on literary critique, suggests the application of these methods to practice-as-research in theatre and performance studies. Bojana Janković engages with the book *Thinking Through Theatre and Performance*, another collection of essays, as a companion for higher education students as an introductory approach to critically engage with the wide range of questions that makers and critics ask in today's climate of performance. The final review by Meg Cunningham, the book reviews section editor, outlines the new versatile critical framework for critical engagement with immersive storytelling as laid out in Alke Gröppel-Wegener and Jenny Kidd's new book *Critical Encounters with Immersive Storytelling*.

What our collective engagement with criticism shows is that many commentators in this issue have identified a certain *precarity of criticism*—both in terms of political uncertainties and in terms of problematic relationships to artistic institution and unstable working conditions. But there are also more hopeful voices as some contributors draw attention to how critical practices are being invigorated by projects that conceive of criticism as a communal practice or bring practitioners into discussions of what constitutes productive criticism. By contemplating new communities of fandom on social media or alternative publication formats, the writers in this issue point to alliances and extended collaborations between artists, critics, and their publics.

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