IN THE CONTEXT OF ART, CRITICISM IS A MANIFESTATION THAT QUESTIONS NOT ONLY THE ART THAT CONFRONTS IT AS ART, BUT ALSO THE EXISTENCE OF ART AS WORLD.
IT ASKS: DOES ART NEED TO BE ART?
CRITICISM IS A MANIFESTATION OF ART THAT OWE'S ITSELF AS MUCH TO THE EXISTENCE AS TO THE NON-EXISTENCE OF ART.
TODAY ONE CAN SAY THAT THE INTENTION OF CRITICISM IS ART AS MUCH AS WHAT REMAINS OF THE WORLD WITHOUT IT, OF THE EVIDENCE OF THE WORLD WITHOUT, BEFORE OR AFTER ART.
Everyone is a critic today. But where is critique? We are all experts evaluating each other. But where are the experts for the greater whole? Every theatre, every museum, every scientific body is expected to explain and publicise its work itself – while independent communication, classification, and evaluation are vanishing with the general media. But without criticism, there is no public sphere. Without the public sphere, no arts. Without the arts, no democracy.

The international congress "The Future of Critique" is an initiative of the Fine Arts Section of the Akademie der Künste and is taking place at the Bundeskunsthalle in Bonn and the Akademie der Künste, Berlin. It is intended as the first step in the long-term redefinition of the role of criticism and the safeguarding of its infrastructure. The programme, arising from conversations across all sections of the Academy, kicks off with "Criticism in hypercirculation" and "The Fall and Rise of the Critical Public", followed by "WHO GETS TO CRITICISE WHOM FROM WHAT POSITION?" and "How has the role of criticism changed?". In the run-up to the congress, Angela Lammert, Head of interdisciplinary special projects at the Academy, and Kolja Reichert, Curator of discourse at the Bundeskunsthalle, talk about the state of criticism.

KOLJA REICHERT We have been working on this congress for almost two years now. Let’s start with the title: Why "The Future of Critique" rather than "The crisis of criticism"?

ANGELA LAMMERT Rather than adding to the lamentation about the crisis of criticism, we’d rather look at the transformation of society through the lens of criticism. The critique of criticism can be traced not just in the rise of identity-critical narratives at the expense of dwindling aesthetic arguments. It is also evident in the degradation of the cultural sphere due to its economic exploitation for rapid consumability. Established places for criticism are falling away at an increasing rate – be that in the declining numbers of pages in media features sections or due to the changed programming priorities in the public broadcasting sector. It’s an ambivalent process, because the old authorities and interpretive hierarchies are also being called into question. There is a lack of financial support for independent criticism: no critics’ fund, hardly any awards for critics; there was no practical aid for critics or criticism during the pandemic. With advancing digitisation, new forms of writing are being tested – be they in self-organised viral networks or in the artistic anticipation of collective practices such as memes. But, if everyone is writing, where are the expert judges, and where is the language game? We also want to discuss the influence of market-oriented models on how art and culture are communicated. Who can participate in the media platforms? Who can’t, and why not? We hope that the congress will become a forum where the different arts as well as different generations will come together and, starting from a diagnosis of the changing role of criticism, investigate the scope for opening new spaces.
KR There was a moment in the preparation of the congress when the flight altitude suddenly changed; it was when the Visual Arts Section invited the Literature, Performing Arts, Film, Architecture, and Music Sections to join in. Suddenly, we were no longer talking about the malaise of art criticism or literary criticism or music criticism, but we saw a subject taking on concrete shape: critique itself, independent of its subject matter. And it became clear that we were gathering here at a moment of crisis in which something has disappeared. And that it cannot be a question of forcing the genie back into the bottle, but that, in the context of a profound transformation of the media – comparable to the establishment of the daily newspaper in the 19th century and radio in the middle of the 20th century – the whole of society is reconstituting itself. New media practices are coming into play, roles become wobbly and new ones take the stage, while there is still a lack of a sense of direction that would allow navigation of this new forum that now lacks a clear demarcation between stage and public.

It is as if all the stages have unfolded into a multipolar universe in which different intensities position themselves and each other, vying for cultural hegemony. Institutions are ultimately personas among others with a profile and an Instagram account. But the people out there who used to be their audience, or still are, also have an Instagram account and an opinion. And why should they consider valuable what the institutions consider valuable? Some are even establishing their own institutions, like Caroline Busta and Lil Internet of the podcast New Models, who, together with Joshua Citarella, Mat Dryhurst, and Holly Herndon, are building up the media platform channel.xyz to make themselves independent of the platform corporations.

AL For me, the biggest change in the role of criticism in the last ten years is what we have called “the omnipresent logic of amplification”: the form of the laudatory review – so not criticism in the literal and technical sense. Criticism, after all, comes from “criticise”. The now reviled “authoritative critic”, on the other hand, is tied to the idea of a radical subjectivity that constitutes the value of criticism. At the beginning of the 20th century, it was also linked to the fact that each newspaper spoke with its single voice.

KR Such as Eduard Beaucamp for the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ).

AL There are historical examples that come more to my mind: Karl Scheffler for Kunst und Künstler, Paul Westheim for Das Kunstblatt, and Max Osborn for the Vossische Zeitung.

KR But don’t they still exist today? Hans-Joachim Müller for Die Welt, Hanno Rauterberg for Die Zeit ...

AL There may be exceptions, but most of them happen to be men ...

KR Not exclusively – Swantje Karich for Die Welt, Elke Buhr for Monopol, Catrin Lorch for the Süddeutsche Zeitung ...

AL In my opinion, there are nevertheless fewer of them, because most of them write for several newspapers and magazines and find it difficult to keep their heads above water financially. And that also has implications for the economic independence of these writers. Digital publications in blogs, podcasts, and the networks of the independent community complete the picture.

KR Of course. When Laszlo Glozer championed Beuys early on, he was a correspondent in Freiburg for the FAZ, part of a large network of regular freelance correspondents who kept an eye on everything happening in the visual arts in their region. When I was the arts editor of the FAZ (later the FAS), museums located away from the major urban centres used to ask: When will you come to visit us? In view of the absence of critical support, some, like the MARTa Herford art museum, organised themselves and built up a strong social media department early on, because they realised that they had to be both – a museum and an institution that reports on the museum – in one.

AL This has led to institutions – especially in the big cities – starting to publish journals themselves and commissioning paid reviews. So these are more like affirmative art reviews.

KR Yes, the number of positions in art education and communication is increasing, while the positions for independent communication in the media are decreasing. Academics are also being compelled to evaluate and market their work themselves. And I think this has to do with the fact that the persuasive power of brands that communicate themselves has almost become stronger than the brands of independent media. Being part of a club, having a fixed opinion and a superior lifestyle, seems more attractive today than participation in open-ended public debates. What criticism contributes seems to me increasingly difficult to communicate: for example, that it is criticism that imagines common horizons and the absence of critical support, some, like the MARTa Herford art museum, organised themselves and built up a strong social media department early on, because they realised that they had to be both – a museum and an institution that reports on the museum – in one.

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The dispute over the value of individual works is what ensures the long-term value of works in the first place. But who sorts and classifies the countless projects and explains their purpose? Criticism, apparently, is no longer considered at all, even in cultural policy. Its image is obviously negative: it always comes too late, it takes up time that you don’t have, and usually finds fault with something. At worst, it is annoying. Brands like Hauser & Wirth, on the other hand, have the same expertise and offer positive identification as well. They form a complete, self-commenting world with their own magazine, their own holiday destinations on Menorca and in the Engadine, and they also have their own publishing house. Its new Director Alex Scrimgeour will speak at the congress. For a long time, he was the reviews editor at the art magazine Artforum, later at Spike Art Quarterly, also Art Magazine, then he was freelance for a while, and now he heads the publishing programme for Hauser & Wirth. Holger Liebs, former arts editor of the Süddeutsche Zeitung, then editor-in-chief of Monopol, then programme director at Hatje Cantz, now press spokesman for the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen in Dresden, will also be participating. As will Julia Voss, who turned down the art editorship of the FAZ in favour of academic and curatorial work at the Deutsches Historisches Museum. Thus, the congress brings together many people who have firsthand experience of current trends.

**AL** You, too, were a critic and are now a curator. Is that honestly due to the persuasive power of brands as opposed to communication through the media?

**KR** I was also a freelance critic for a long time, then editor for Spike Art Quarterly, then the FAZ, later the FAS, and am now curator for discourse – a quite recent job description – at the Bundeskunsthalle in Bonn. In fifteen years as a critic, I have been fortunate to be able to learn and organise a great deal without having to make compromises. Essentially the role of the critic seems the most attractive to me, because independence keeps one constantly open to developing new questions and criteria. One takes part in caring for public discourse by offering critical questioning of one’s own subjectivity. After every art criticism seminar, my impression is that half of those attending would opt for a job as a critic if it was still economically feasible for them to do so. It’s awful that this is no longer the case. This also puts the meaning of artists’ work at stake, and thus the contours of the arts themselves. The less critical discourse develops concepts in art, the more works and institutions become mere targets for populist critiques of power. If the language for the work is lost, then the work and the people surrounding it are subjected to solely ideological abstractions. And then there are no more criteria to agree on, no common goals worth fighting for, and only the struggle of all against all.

**AL** If you go back to the root or origin of the word “criticism”, it also has something to do with discernment, which in turn has to do with comparison. Comparing would be the basis for judging. This has to do with the criteria, with the frame of reference of whatever kind, which can only evolve out of the works and the object of criticism. The shift in the relationship between aesthetic and political-moralising arguments seems to make it more difficult to perceive distinct critical positions – regardless of whether they are published in the digital, written, or public media. At least that’s the message that comes across to me as someone who hasn’t worked as a critic myself. Perhaps it also has to do with an obliviousness to history and art’s total reference to the present. After all, this dialogical principle already existed in Denis Diderot’s salon conversations, which basically also manifested the beginnings of pluralism. Hence it is not really a new phenomenon, as is so often discussed today in connection with memes or other forms of collective writing.

**KR** Here, we see two opposing models of the public sphere that reveal a shift: on the one hand, the public sphere administered by central institutions such as newspapers, radio, museums, theatres, and opera houses – and these maintain discourses about the arts so that what an artist or institution contributes acquires meaning by being placed in context with something else. That is only possible with criticism. On the other hand, through so-called social media, we have a multipolar universe in which everyone is a critic, a work in themselves, and an artist at the same time, positioning themselves and ascribing and questioning value.

**AL** One future of criticism could be to build bridges between opposing poles. Whether it is the question of a productive relation-
ship between narratives of aesthetics and identity politics or, as Nikita Dhawan attempts, between Western European Enlightenment thought and postcolonial theories.

**KR** Of course, that is the other great transformation that’s under way. On the one hand, we see the crumbling of a system that ensures distance and common ground, based on which mutual criticism is possible, with an increasing number of worlds emerging that are identical with themselves and comment on themselves. On the other hand, this is taking place in a radically open space where everyone hears everyone else. And when everyone hears everyone else, of course, it is more difficult to poke fun at others than it used to be – because those on the receiving end will react. They might complain or make their own jokes. And that is actually a wonderful situation. People often complain about it, along the lines of you’re not allowed to say anything anymore, you’re not allowed to do anything anymore, and so on. But I think that if you look at the whole space, this is not a bad starting point. It is a new status quo in human history where potentially everyone is always listening in. Of course, this makes certain questions more acute: who has had the interpretative sovereignty up until now? Who has been free to define this network of values? And who has been a priori excluded from this network through economic or cultural exclusion, through racial prejudice, all of which are often entangled.

**AL** I’m hoping that, with a few examples, we will manage to show where certain problematic issues – even if they seem quite different to us today – are structurally similar to historical discussions. You mentioned the advent of the newspaper. Digitisation has put us in a similar situation. What has remained – to take up an idea from the art theorist Robert Kudielka – is that criticism is always a linguistic effort, even in memes as witty image/text combinations. For me, the question is: In what ways do subjects today give rise to criteria and ways of writing? This means not applying the discourse to the topic but starting from it. Criticism is to be written from the participatory and performative situation, to be developed from materialised artistic expression. It is a matter of judging, criticising, and writing from the perspective of a field of reference determined by the common ground.

**KR** And, from these works and their description, to allow the view of the common ground or the common ground itself to shift perhaps by 0.3 degrees. This encounter you describe is potentially capable of rethinking circulation and slowing down ideological abstractions, or perhaps of gaining distance and rethinking them. These are the stakes that the arts – and what remains of the field of criticism, and the institutions as well – are wrestling for: that the penetration of common material by the individual can always shift something. This is only possible if the encounter with it is possible. And that, in turn, is only possible if the encounter with it has value for society and if this value is understood. This is ensured by criticism. It extrapolates common horizons from individual works, and puts the individual works in relation to these horizons. Criticism creates the common ground which makes sure that criticism isn’t flattened into agonistic battles over mutual annihilation, but aims for mutual improvement.

**AL** I’d rather tend to say that art itself can also be criticism, just as criticism can also be art – one only need think of Charles Baudelaire. Furthermore, it is important to bear in mind that it is not only a question of changing criticism in art, but also of transversal sections, as called for by Siegfried Zielinski: diagonally, to knowledge and aesthetics. The critique of criticism is a battlefield. Who criticizes whom and from where? How can we oppose the diminishing relevance of criticism? And how are we to comprehend new conceptualisations and practices of criticism and art?

**Artist Cem A. entertains the art world with his critical memes on the @freeze_magazine account. He will accompany the communication of the congress with a series of specially developed memes.**