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MATHILDE ROMAN CHRONICLE
INTERNATIONAL 29 June 2020

Art Criticism in the Face of the Crisis

The Covid-19 crisis has highlighted the fragilities of the cultural system, and has brought out the need to reflect and militate

LINKS

- [Aica International](#)
- [Plural Art Mag](#)
- [ArtPress](#)
- [Hyperallergic](#)
- [Kunstkritikk](#)

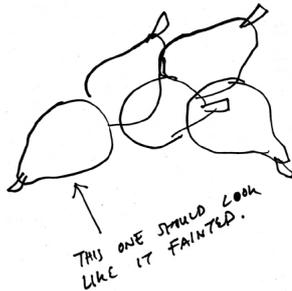
MARGINAL NOTES

- [1] Plural Art Mag, Letters from Ho Chi Minh City, when uncertainty is the only certainty
- [2] "EL ARTE CONTEMPORÁNEO ANTES LA CRISIS DEL COVID-19 – CONTEXTO ARAGONÉS", collective supportec AECA (AIC) 

for better valorisation of certain working conditions, such as those of art critics. While this fundamentally transversal, non-academic writing practice engaging with works and artists cannot be considered separately from a global ecosystem, it is nonetheless striking the way this system

often overlooks its demands. Benefitting from collaboration between the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) and Switch (on Paper), Mathilde Roman has conducted a survey to discuss the economic realities of art critics in times of crisis.

It's December. A meticulously arranged pile of peas is eluding its own decay. A re-toacher is replacing each fruit every other day, preserving the pile. The season is changing. The peas never fall apart.



An ill-defined and fragile activity

Art criticism is a discipline with a long history, dating back to the 18th century, built in parallel with the figure of the spectator, and hence the public exhibition of art. It plays an essential part in establishing the relationship between the work, the artist and the public, facilitating the encounter, but also the expression and questioning of emotions and ideas. The task is complex, which is what makes it exciting and demanding, and it is more readily defined as a vocation than a

and its representative in Aragon, the AACA (Asociación Aragonesa de Críticos de Arte).

[3] Pablo Martinez, head of programming at MACBA, Barcelona, in

“Notas para un museo por venir”, Contexto y Accion, 28/05/2020.



profession, which does not facilitate its recognition. While its role is central, its definition and responsibility thus remain vague and shifting. It is still very fragile today on a socio-economic level, despite the action of AICA, which since 1948 has been committed to defending the rights of critics through its fifty or so national sections

representing more than 5000 members. In France, in an article published in the daily newspaper Libération on 8 July 2019, Patricia Falguières and Elisabeth Lebovici clearly summarised the risk that art criticism might become a bourgeois pastime, being so little recognised as a job by the remunerative bodies that are newspapers and magazines, but also by museums, art centres and galleries. The Covid-19 crisis, by impacting the cultural world through the closure of exhibitions, has given rise to numerous forums on the fragility of the independent artists, graphic designers, curators and publishers who allow it to exist. However, these open letters or petitions, and the exceptional measures announced, have left the art critic's position in its usual state of obscurity, both in the media and in the eyes of government authorities. Yet critics have also suffered cancellations or postponements of exhibitions (and thus their analysis in the press), of commissions for various publications, but also of conferences and juries, all of which contribute to the complex and fragile economic balance of art research. The groups of cultural associations that have come together to speak with a single voice have made very little mention of the need to strengthen the economic status of the critic. It is nevertheless essential to act as a united front, as Stéphane Corréard proposed in an article in the newspaper Libération on May 15, 2020, associating artists, curators and art critics "to allow the visual arts to become part of the cultural exception". At the Centre National des Arts



Plastiques (CNAP), the list of exceptional grants may well include artist-authors, and the Fondation de Galbert may have awarded grants via AICA France to the most vulnerable art critics, yet these grants, which are relatively small in amount, remain very exceptional.

A Hollywood actor is shamed and fired.



In order to expand and enrich our analysis of the situation, in May 2020 we carried out a survey among the Presidents of the National Sections of AICA in various parts of the world. The responses testify first of all to the difficulty of isolating a status for art criticism when it is carried out at the same time in different positions: journalist, teacher-researcher, exhibition curator, lecturer, mediator, but also artist. Faced with these multiple identities, as AICA Ireland expressed it, where no financial help has been given to them, it is difficult to make unified demands. The media visibility of exhibition curators often tends to erase the position of art critic. In Australia, it was necessary to fulfil the function of curator in order to benefit from the exceptional aid proposed by the government, except in Melbourne, which extended it to all arts practitioners. In England, emergency funds were created, also for art critics who had suffered cancellations, but for fairly low amounts since the aid could not exceed £2,500 (2,815 euros).



The German situation has been the envy of many in Europe, since the various aids provided by the federal governments to compensate for the closure of cultural institutions have been addressed to all self-employed art workers. On the other hand, this regionalised operation also has its weaknesses since real disparities were noted, for example between Berlin, where individual aid of 5,000 euros was allocated within a few days to cover the first three months of the crisis, and the Rhineland, where grants proved to be much more difficult to obtain. This inclusive model for art professionals has, however, proved to be very effective in covering the diversity of critical practice. Similarly, in Norway, the public authorities have set up an ambitious response by releasing numerous exceptional grants, aimed at everyone.

It's October. Steve is intimately bound and violently separate to no one. He attacks, jacks, tucks, passes, tricks, screams, seduces, embraces, team builds, then fights the wall. He is also calling the names of people who are not there. He has no knowledge of sharing weight. He is learning and unfolding multi-layered parts of a multi-person choreography, which he did not build himself. Now he is calibrating the room, underlining a protocol, slowing movement down. He is smoking a cigarette outside. He is following an instruction unexpectedly.

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Virtual dynamism

In all countries, including those where critics have suffered from little or no financial support, the lockdown period has led to an upsurge of publications, a proliferation of forums, theoretical reflections and points of view linking aesthetics and politics, on the one hand, testifying to the need to refer to works of art in times of crisis, and on the other hand to a position of withdrawal. In



Pakistan, Niilofur Farrukh thus highlighted the wealth of content published on online magazines, which took the opportunity to revisit their archives while inviting curators and art critics to speak. Working groups were also set up, like the one associated with the Karachi Biennale, which initiated a process of collective reading on the decolonization of South Asia. In the words of Niilofur Farukh, "So primarily we all have shifted gears from chasing show reviews to introspective journeys." In Pakistan, the real economic precariousness of art critics has led them to be active in several areas, and the impact of the crisis will be more visible in a few months, when the usual mechanisms of grants and commissions will be weakened by the global crisis. In Slovakia, Juraj Carni testified to the same situation: the year 2020 having begun with the arrival of Covid-19, subsidies were already being paid out. It is the uncertain future that is causing the greatest concern, prompting collective thinking about the "new normality" that is taking shape, and about the profound impact of the changeover to a lasting, global crisis, leading to the need to invent new ways of organising life and collaborative work patterns.

In Singapore and Malaysia, where the economic crisis has already had a dramatic impact on the most fragile populations, and where the scarce public and private funds available only go to artists and art centres, digital platforms constitute a place of resistance. Plura Art Mag has thus published a series of fascinating texts by critics, curators and artists, in a series of introspective journeys and attempts to think together about ways of dealing with unpredictable realities. The letters from Ho Chi Minh City exchanged between Zoe Butt and Lêna Bùi, published at the end of April under the title "When Uncertainty is the only



Certainty" ¹, are indicative of these new modes of collaborative writing, rooted in personal experience and engaging thinking that closely links artistic reflections to societal issues.

*On Fake Tears and Outsourcing –
Musicians Respond To Email, And Manufacture
A Pop Song, Just-in-time, Daily (The No. 1 Hit), 2016*
Lead vocalist, backup vocalist, pianist, guitarist,
bassist, drummer, refrigerator, carpet, pot plants, two-way mirror,
recording equipment, drum kit, emails, notice board
3 days



Frailties and a critical silence

"I want to do better, accomplish more each day, but I can't. I'm just treading water and hope I do not drown", reads to a sentence taken from the responses of AICA USA. Contrary to what naive fantasy might project, being locked up at home does not help writing. On the contrary, you have to fight to find meaning, maintain your professional networks, and pursue your research in spite of the cancelled texts and postponed publication of articles and essays. The crisis in the publishing world affects first and foremost the fields of the human sciences, whose distribution relies heavily on specialized booksellers, often linked to cultural institutions. As the questionnaire sent to AICA USA members pointed out, the closure of museums, art centres and galleries has also made things difficult for all the newspapers devoted to the local scene.

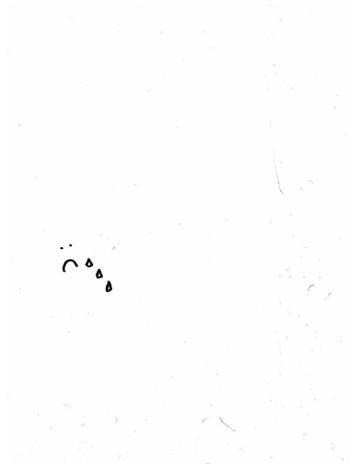


Loss of advertising revenue and loss of inspiration for critics who sometimes tried to invent alternative ways of writing about closed exhibitions, but overall wrote less, and thus lost revenue. It is also hard to sustain enthusiasm about all the virtual tours of closed exhibitions, the flood of online activities proposed by places to

transform the loss of real experience and the supposed inactivity of confined workers into remote aesthetic emotions. Perhaps it is then the role of the critic to demand a time of withdrawal, of waiting, of distance in the face of what calls into question the driving force behind his desire to write, the aesthetic relationship? In Serbia, where the context is basically very difficult since there are no longer any art magazines, no specific funding from the cultural milieu has been introduced in response to the crisis, and the few existing grant applications leave little hope that they will go primarily to art critics. The lockdown period has resulted in a "critical silence", in a position of withdrawal and waiting for the crisis to evolve.

The suddenness of the crisis related to multiple closures has also prompted a number of fundamental steps to make demands. In Spain, where, as in Germany, aid systems are regionalised, a real financial commitment was demanded from the Aragon government in a long opinion column, demanding real economic support for an otherwise very dynamic sector in the fields of creation and ideas, which is also exemplary in terms of gender parity. The crisis has made the many independent artists who create the vitality and proliferation of the visual arts sector more fragile. The purpose of this column, addressed to the government, was to bring together critics, mediators and artists in the same petition, advocating global support for the visual arts sector².





On Fake Tears and Outsourcing Lecture, 2016
Lecture, actor impersonating Cally Spooner,
box of tissues, water drop, water bottle

As museums and galleries gradually reopen their doors, as magazines announce the return to printed versions, the situation seems to be easing for some, but nevertheless remains very problematic for the majority: on alternative stages, in the parts of the world least protected from the ultra-violent logics of the liberal system, but also among countries with the strongest economies, where the status of the art critic is constantly devalued because it is not considered as real work. While it is pleasing to note that, globally, there has been a strong desire to come closer together, to set up common projects or invent other ways of working, it is all the more necessary today to impose different occupational schemes and invent collaborative economies. The symbolic recognition of the power of thought in no way detracts from the need to give it economic recognition. This message needs to be repeated to institutions and magazines that are only too accustomed to not granting real remuneration to authors. In France, the



rates applied by the magazine Artpress are disastrous, and the switch to digital technology has instituted a degrading practice since the editorial staff impose free remuneration for authors when articles are published online, a practice common to many other media. In the US, Hyperallergic, a successful digital media, recently

campaigned by asking readers for a contribution to compensate for the loss of advertising revenue during the Covid-19 crisis. A participatory logic that seems justified today, when free of charge and advertising are no longer models, but which also requires a more respectful commitment towards authors, who are currently paid too little for their articles, whatever the format. If the future of art criticism lies in digital platforms, this transition must be accompanied by a more substantial economic valorisation of authors, and a real commitment to support thinking-based work. The demand for better support for art workers is being heard almost everywhere, reminding us of the urgent need to "take care of those who take care"³ of the daily lives of visitors, art works and experiences, and who are mostly precarious, often self-employed, or at best salaried with low incomes. While developed countries have adopted many support measures, the Covid-19 crisis has above all brought out the need to establish a universal income for art workers, to improve their social protection and develop real policies to support creation in the visual arts sector. A situation that is perfectly summed up by the editor-in-chief of the Nordic magazine Kunstcritic Mariann Enge in an article calling for international mobilization, "Isolated Cultural Workers of the World, Unite!": "And the very fact that it takes extraordinary measures to compensate freelancers and self-employed people for loss of income highlights the need for truly universal welfare schemes."



Translation by Angela Kent

« Cally Spooner's work reflects forms of exhaustion from contemporary ways of life. The capitalization of emotions, the financialization of the relationships of individuals to bodies and architectures lead

to states of separation, loss of contact and identity. These texts and drawings are taken from her monograph « ON FALSE TEARS » , Commissioned by Vleeshal Center for Contemporary Art, Middelburg. Published by Hatje Cantz with Edizioni Madre, 2020 »

Cover picture: Cally Spooner, *Still Life*, 2018

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Sociology

About the author

Mathilde Roman

After studying philosophy, Mathilde Roman graduated Phd in Arts and Sciences of Art, Univ. Paris 1 Sorbonne. She teaches at the Pavillon Bosio, Art & Scénographie, Monaco. Art critic, she's treasurer of AICA International. She published two essays : *On Stage, The theatrical Dimension of Video Image*, Intellect, UK, 2016, and *Art vidéo et mise en scène de soi*, L'Harmattan, 2008, and *Corps et images. Oeuvres, dispositifs et écrans contemporains*, Mimésis, 2017. She has conducted several curatorial projects, recently *Danse, Danse, Danse*, Nouveau



Musée National de Monaco, 2016, *Full Screen*, La Station, Nice, 2016, MOVIMENTA, first Biennial of Moving Image in Nice, 2017, and in 2018, "Performance TV" at Maison d'Arts Bernard Antonioz, Nogent sur Marne. In the fall of 2020, she will publish « Habiter

l'exposition. L'artiste et la scénographie » ed. Manuella

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