The Social Figure of the Female Art Critic (Bochum, 4-6 May 23)

Ruhr-Universität Bochum, May 4–06, 2023
Deadline: Dec 16, 2022

Stephanie Marchal, Prof. Dr.

The Social Figure of the Female Art Critic, or The Gender of Art Criticism.

Organized by Prof. Dr. Stephanie Marchal and Dr. Isabel Mehl (Ruhr-University Bochum) in cooperation with Prof. Dr. Astrid Mania (HfbK Hamburg), Prof. Dr. Brigitte Soelch (University of Heidelberg), and PD Dr. Anne Hultzsch (ETH Zürich) supported by Sophia Holzmann M.A., Anna Schrepper M.A. and Julia Ziegler M.A (Ruhr-University Bochum).

Since the 1970s, the discourse on art criticism has been dominated by widely credited claims that the practice is in 'crisis'. However, this prevalent talk is lacking a thorough analysis. It is worth asking: Who speaks about a crisis and on what basis is this diagnosis made? The guiding hypothesis of our workshop is that it is based on a specific, male-dominated conception of critique and that the assessment of art criticism changes profoundly once we take into consideration a major corpus that is as yet largely ignored and uncharted: Just as detractors began to proclaim a crisis, female critics internationally joined the profession for the first time and fundamentally transformed critique.

In a nutshell: In the Western narrative, art criticism as a specific form of critique evolved in the course of the Enlightenment as an instrument of emancipation wielded by a nascent bourgeois society that was looking for ways to articulate an understanding of itself. As suggested by the literal meaning of krínein, to separate or distinguish, criticism promised to be a tool of such self-understanding by identifying and evaluating differences. Considering the fact that the same bourgeois society also sharpened the divide between the sexes, our workshop will investigate how this divide was encoded in critique as well—the more so since art criticism throughout the modern era has not only conceived of its object, art, as in many respects an ‘other’, but also explicitly lent it connotations of ‘femininity.’ The hypothesis we want to discuss within the framework of this workshop is that virtually all the tropes that underlie ideas about art and creativity derive from male perspectives, and this also holds true for modern art criticism: society’s self-understanding through art was shaped by male critics who defined themselves as a unified peer group by distinction from the ‘other.’ Their hierarchical relation to that ‘other’—the object, woman—was part and parcel of the critical act of sundering and correlating.

It was not until ca. 1970 that the professional profile of the art critic became accessible to women and a significant number of female critics appeared on the scene—‘female’ being conceived here as a subject position shaped by gendered socialization and not in any sense as an essentialist cat-

egory. To give some examples: Carla Lonzi, as an expression of her aversion to patriarchal genealogies, “spat” on Hegel (1974) and, like the new feminist journals Heresies and Chrysalis (both launched in 1977), experimented with concepts of authorship, presenting art criticism alongside poetic, theoretical, and activist writings. Cindy Nemser, Patricia Mainardi and Irene Moss initiated The Feminist Art Journal (1972). Helke Sander founded Europe’s first feminist film journal Frauen und Film (1974). Gislind Nabakowski became the first female editor-in-chief of a German-language art journal, heute Kunst (1973); and Rosalind Krauss left Artforum to launch October together with Annette Michelson (1976). A little earlier, in 1963, Jean Lipman, an editor at Art in America, had rejected a submission by Clement Greenberg.

Rather than focusing on these ventures of a significant number of female critics, however, the discourse on art criticism since the 1970s has been dominated by widely credited claims that the practice is in ‘crisis’ (cf. Beaucamp 2012; Graw 2012; Lehmann 2012; Elkins/Newman 2008; Rubinstein 2006; Demand 2003; October Roundtable 2002; Berger 1998, Michelson 1969). It has been faulted for a loss of discernment, distance from its object, and impaired authority ever since. What seems to have been overlooked and even actively ignored in an act of epistemic violence is, according to our hypothesis, that this diagnosis of a crisis mourns the decline of a hegemonic conception of art criticism primarily championed by its solitary ‘grand masters,’ from Denis Diderot to Clement Greenberg. It took female critics to point out the outmoded gesture of power implicit in this conception of criticism and to propose a productive reinterpretation of the symptoms of crisis. In a long run, it might be productive to also challenge these female approaches with regard to recent demands: Sabeth Buchmann and Isabelle Graw (2019) argued for an art criticism that “subject[s] its own involvement to scrutiny as well, though we would caution against a purely reflexive self-criticism that finds a kind of comfort in the mere admission that it occupies a position in the field.”

How the women critics challenged the patriarchal structures of art and criticism will be explored and discussed during the workshop in order to revise the understanding of critique. The guiding questions are: What changes with the entry of the social figure of the female art critic into the formerly male domain of critique—in terms of ways of dealing with art, subject / object constitution, language, rhetoric, narratives, literariness, persuasiveness, and social function? What is the institutional affiliation of the female art critic and how does this affect her writing? To what extent and with what consequences for art-critical argumentation is recourse made to a changed frame of reference (Marxism, Structuralism, Psychology, etc.) and is the sui generis interdisciplinary phenomenon of art criticism thereby changed in its basic structures? How did ethical-politcal agendas like feminism come into play and changed hithero prevailing concepts and practices of critique? The focus should also be diachronically extended. Which forms of art-critical writing did female beholders produce when criticism was not yet available to them as a profession? How did the widespread exclusion from the public sphere impact women’s writing?

This call aims to explore the field of female art critics and their practices, and bring together academics working in this research area.
We are looking forward to contributions from visual culture studies, art history and subject-related disciplines (especially from graduate and postgraduate students). Additionally, we are open to submissions from artists working on the topic as well.

Workshop languages are English and German.

Please send your abstracts (up to 400 words, English or German) and a short CV (up to 150 words) by Dec 16, 2022 to:
Stephanie.Marchal@rub.de and Isabel.Mehl@rub.de

Reference:
CFP: The Social Figure of the Female Art Critic (Bochum, 4-6 May 23). In: ArtHist.net, Nov 22, 2022 (accessed Nov 23, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/37989>.