

**Barbara Steiner**

**Being critical. Still.**

After the late 1940s and early 1950s, criticism of the state of society and continual self-reflection formed the basis of the socialist plan for society. At the Second Bitterfeld Conference, in 1964, Walter Ulbricht drew a clear distinction between "critical realism", which "in capitalist society... had the task of making people aware of capitalist contradictions, with the aim of overthrowing capitalist hegemony", and "socialist realism", which serves the "mastery of socialist progress." Here too, however, Ulbricht emphasised that this "must be critical" and "expose backwardness and contradictions in order to contribute to the completion of the work of construction."<sup>1</sup> In this context, socialist art was assigned the task of "practising harsh artistic criticism of the inhumanity of imperialist reality" and fighting "with the weapon of criticism against everything backward and debilitating as part of the comprehensive construction of socialism." Art should do neither more nor less than "artistically reveal the truth about the life of working people", he stated, adding "We demand from art that it discovers and records truth and beauty in the life of man".<sup>2</sup> The demand for truth, in the sense of partisanship and faithfulness to principles, was made of all those engaged in the arts in East Germany and it was soon directed against them, or at least against an ever-larger group. Self-criticism was publicly demanded and it was also publicly delivered, as several statements by well-known artists showed.<sup>3</sup> In this regard, clearly criticism was functionalised to serve and to strengthen the system. The extent of the criticism required and practised by the state authorities was matched by (dissenting) criticism of the political situation, although the latter was strictly punished. In the socialist countries there were two types of criticism<sup>4</sup> from the outset: firstly as officially required and practised, in concurrence with the prevailing doctrine, and secondly as "dissenting" criticism, in divergence from the prevailing doctrine. The publicly compelled critical statement as a vehicle for the political and social development of socialism was diametrically opposed to critical debate with the system. Culture and art played major parts in both forms of criticism. In both cases, the officially required and the dissenting, we encounter a notion of criticism that - albeit with a differing vanishing point - is equated with revealing truth, with resolving contradictions and with criticism of ideology.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ulbricht, Walter, Prinzipienfestigkeit ist nicht Dogmatismus, Aus der Rede Walter Ulbrichts auf der II. Bitterfelder Konferenz, in: Bildende Kunst, 7 64, p. 339

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 341 f.

<sup>3</sup> Willi Sitte, for instance, said that he "had not always represented the position of my party to its full extent with regard to the 5th Dresden Art Exhibition..." (p. 49). In 1953, writing of the 3rd German Art exhibition in the magazine "Bildende Kunst", Helmut Holtzhauer and Kurt Magritz are full of praise: "the unremitting involvement in discussions, the work of educating and convincing people, above all by criticism and self-criticism, were not in vain. Formalism has suffered a defeat..." (p. 25). Both in: Stationen eines Weges. Dokumentation zur Kunst und Kunstpolitik der DDR 1945-1998, zs.gestellt von Günter Feist, Berlin 1988.

<sup>4</sup> In Western societies, giving criticism on ideological, philosophical, economical, political or artistic matters was primarily left to intellectuals and neither encouraged nor guided by the state.

<sup>5</sup> It is noticeable that (simplified) reference is made to Karl Marx and his use of the term "ideology", ideology being understood solely in the sense of a distortion of reality: this notion, allegedly Marx's, has in the meantime been differentiated in academic studies by such as Stuart Hall and Jorge Larraín. Both, see: Hall, Stuart, Critical dialogues in cultural studies, Morley, David and Chen, Kuan-Hsing. London 1996, p. 25-70

In the capitalist countries, in the 1960s and 1970s, the authoritarian, hierarchical character of criticism and its claim to (absolute) truth was increasingly the subject of debates, both in the streets and in the production of knowledge. The post-structuralists in particular, in texts by Jean-Francois Lyotard, Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, among others, took issue with a central paradigm of the Enlightenment and the critique of ideology: reason. Trust in reason, acceptance of universal standards, and belief in reaching the ultimate truth – moreover, our ability to reach any kind of truth that isn't partial, local, and dependent on context, and thus all totalising theories maintaining universal social emancipation – were called into question. Ideological criticism, arising from an emancipatory, Enlightenment background,<sup>6</sup> was rejected because it suggests that there is a "false" or "illusory" consciousness, which must be overcome in favour of the "true" one.<sup>7</sup> In other words, these theories were questioned because its proponents claim to know these contradictions of society and to reveal them. Their arguments are not merely perforce over-simplifications, however, but also "terrorist" acts according to Jean-Francois Lyotard, which would legitimise the suppression of differences. Apart from that, the critic is, in his view, always dependent on the system being criticised: the critic always remains within the sphere of the criticised (...) and deeply hierarchical: from where does the critic derive his power over the criticised? (...) does he know better? (...) is he the teacher, the tutor? (...) the father confessor and God the Father, who helps the sinner to salvation?"<sup>8</sup>

The roles being addressed here are ones that we can find in the field of the visual arts as well. In the early phase of capitalism, art was expected to embody the good, true and beautiful in a materialist world. The role of the artist was rather messianic in nature, promising salvation. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the artist as prophet appeared – as significant examples I would pick out Vassily Kandinsky and Kasimir Malevich.<sup>9</sup> The figure of the educator or teacher is to be found subsequently up until the Sixties or the Seventies, both in capitalist and in socialist countries. In the West, Joseph Beuys in particular, combined his criticism of society with a mission to educate. In the course of this educational process, viewers became pupils and artists became teachers, while art spaces doubled as seminar rooms and lecture halls.<sup>10</sup> Under socialism,

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<sup>6</sup> Compare: Frankfurt School. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, and later Jürgen Habermas still saw in the „enlightenment of the enlightenment" a chance to stop the perversion of emancipative projects. See the debates between Lyotard and Habermas in: Martin Jay und Richard Rorty in: *Praxis International* 4:1, 1984, S. 1-14 u. 32-44, see: Jean-François Lyotard, *Das postmoderne Wissen*. [1979]. Wien/Graz 1986, S. 39 u. 58., Michel Foucault, *Von der Subversion des Wissens*. Frankfurt/Berlin/Wien, S. 9f. Ders., *Dispositive der Macht*. Berlin 1978, S. 34.

<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, Ulbricht put forward precisely the same argument at the Second Bitterfeld Conference; just as dissident artists did at the Third Bitterfeld Conference in 1994.

After the end of the Communist regime, the desire and appeal to an ultimate truth (revealed by art) remained a subject in the states of former East Germany well into the 1990s, as is shown by the "Third Bitterfeld Conference", convened by Klaus Staeck and Christoph Tannert in Berlin in 1994.

<sup>8</sup> Lyotard, J.-F.: *Dérive à partir de Marx et Freud* (10/18, 754), Paris, 1973, p. 10

<sup>9</sup> In their writings they both referred to the prophetic role of the artists, see: Kandinsky, Wassily, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (ed. Max Bill), Bern o.J., p. 42-43./Malewitsch, Kasimir, *Die gegenstandslose Welt* (Bauhausbuch 1927), Winkler, H.M. (ed.), Mainz und Berlin 1980, p. 66

<sup>10</sup> See: In 1977, Beuys invited the Freie Internationale Universität to documenta VI. For 100 days people were discussing and teaching at the Fredericianum in Kassel.

professional artists were supposed to guide the workers, ("Pick up your pen, buddy! Socialist National Culture needs you!", First Bitterfeld Conference, 1959) and give them an understanding of the nature of socialism, which meant placing themselves wholly in the service of the socialist plan for society. They were supposed, however, to stay self-critical and capable of learning, which involved, for their part, learning from the workers or the party in return. Neither was there any change in the educational impulse when it concerned dissident standpoints. In every case, art stands on the side of truth, which is to be communicated to those who cannot or will not see it. Thus the "poor, oppressed, uneducated, blinded", who cannot recognise the distortion of whichever reality is concerned (capitalist, socialist etc.) are placed in opposition to the "critical educator", who can. This is exactly the accusation formulated by Lyotard in asking: "From where does the critic draw his power over that which is criticised? Does he know any better?" I would describe this authoritarian formulation of the concept of truth as the number one problem of artistic criticism/critique.<sup>11</sup>

The second problem of artistic criticism/critique I see in the voluntary and involuntary complicity with a system that is criticised. This can take the form of political (in socialism) or economic complicity (capitalism). I would say that the former hardly plays a part any longer in our context, whereas the latter - the reinforcement of a comprehensive logic of economic exploitation, while simultaneously wanting to undermine precisely that - has become more acute since the nineteen-sixties and seventies. In their study entitled "Spirit of Capitalism" Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello came to the conclusion that, in essence, it is thanks to artistic and social criticism<sup>12</sup> that capitalism repeatedly succeeded in modifying and stabilising itself anew. Thus the artistic criticism/critique of capitalism that has been practised since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the calls for creativity and authenticity of the late seventies met with increasing resonance when it became clear to see that a growing percentage of company profits can be generated by mobilising the resources of imagination and innovation. Against this background, art is no longer considered to be an area of opposition per se but rather as one that can be exploited economically. Anything can potentially be enlisted in the logic of exploitation: authenticity; subversion; criticism. It is irrelevant to this whether the exploitation is deliberate or not, as the perception of so-called institutional critique<sup>13</sup> in the nineteen-sixties and seventies shows nicely. Here I would like to focus on the interest of these artists on the white cube, a type of exhibition space, which had turned into an unquestioned, naturalised container for art. The spectrum of the artists involved ranged from critical analysis of the white cube, its material constituents and its

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<sup>11</sup> There has to be made a distinction between criticism and critique. Whereas criticism bases on the application of naturalised values and judgements, critique questions exactly these assumptions and values and aims to show their social construction.

<sup>12</sup> Boltanski, Luc and Chiapello, Ève: *Der neue Geist des Kapitalismus*, Konstanz 2003, p. 526 ff.

<sup>13</sup> The term "Institutional Critique" refers to artistic positions, which reflected on and examined critically the institutional apparatus. Among others there are: Michael Asher, Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke, Marcel Broodthaers, Dan Graham.

economic and political interrelationships, the connection of the exhibition space to other social spaces and even the recharging of its function. The WC was dissected to its ideological framework and robbed of its mythic quality; it was portrayed variously as an economic instrument for adding value, as linguistic convention, and as a support of the cultural hegemony of certain interest groups. The social gap was bridged, borders drawn between art and society were marked out, materials with differing social connotations were introduced into the WC and the WC was embedded in a network of political, economic and social references and interdependencies. The exhibition space became a stage, a linguistic space, an educational space, and a space for political articulation.<sup>14</sup> On one hand, it could be said that the WC was stripped of its 'nature' and became recognisable as a social and historical product. On the other, it seems to be, however, that the use of critique to increase people's awareness of the mechanisms of the WC and the way in which it worked also created the perfect basis for making art institutions increasingly subject to economics: in the sense of exploiting them better; endowing them with other - commercial - functions and tearing down the barriers between art and commerce, concentration and spectacle. In the late 70ies and 80ies one could get the impression, that the WC survived all attacks, was modified and stronger than before. This observation brought Brian O'Doherty in 1986, 10 years after his groundbreaking text series „Inside the White Cube" to the misgivings that "the difficult and dangerous art from 1964 to 1976 and their messages has disappeared from the public view."<sup>15</sup> This confirms the observations of Boltanski and Chiapello regarding the role of artistic critique in capitalist renewal-processes. Artists and curators in most of the cases unwillingly strengthen a system, which they find quite suspicious. And this stands of course for all critical artistic practise - no matter if it is located "inside" or "outside" the museums/gallery walls.<sup>16</sup> Even socially-critically working artists have to ask themselves to what extent their practices are not providing the perfect backdrop for the outsourcing of work that was once the responsibility of local government, and how far they themselves are unintentionally functioning as compliant executors of questionable economic assimilation. This is especially relevant at present, when the artistic strategies developed by such artists are increasingly being adopted by town planners and investors, without implementing their emancipatory social component.<sup>17</sup> In short: there is hardly a sphere left that is not exposed to the conditions of 'economic reason'.

Today in post-socialist/capitalist societies - for different reasons - critics and the object of critique have tended to disappear. In the capitalist societies, there is a

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<sup>14</sup> See: Steiner, Barbara, Die Ideologie des weißen Ausstellungsraumes, Dissertation an der Universität Wien, 2002

<sup>15</sup> O'Doherty, Brian, In der weißen Zelle. Inside the White Cube, Wolfgang Kemp (Ed.), Berlin, 1996, p. 137

<sup>16</sup> This we can see with Group Material in 1981. Their gallery in 13<sup>th</sup> street/Lower East Side, New York, was initiated against an elitish precise of art and should help to strengthen the people in the neighbourhood. GM constructed/preconceived this neighbourhood, its interests and needs and they did not notice economic aspects: Their service made the living quarter more attractive. At the end of the 70ies more and more artists, galleries, clubs, investors, real estate agencies settled down and kicked out the poor.

<sup>17</sup> See: Shrinking Cities, Philipp Oswalt (Ed.), vol I and II, Ostfildern-Ruit, 2004 and 2005 and: Steiner, Barbara, Komplizenschaft? Zur Rolle von Kunst und Kultur in der zeitgenössischen Stadtplanung, in: Arch plus, 173, Mai 2005, S. 78/79

growing understanding that almost everything can be exploited in economic terms and that criticism/critique always implies a kind of complicity, while in the post-socialist ones, state-controlled and dissident criticism alike have vanished along with the political system. If in the former GDR the concept of art and criticism as a function of the state was predominant, carrying with it to some extent a social interest in art that was dictated from above,<sup>18</sup> after the reunification this was changed completely. The politically repressive system disappeared, art – and so also interest in art – came to be "privatised", and the links between art and social structures were fundamentally terminated. But as a result art also lost its status as a "counter-position" – a form of expression that takes a stand against the system.<sup>19</sup> Contemporary and socially critical art, in particular, seemed suddenly to have become superfluous, to be "no longer needed", in the words of the composer Mia Ciobanu, who writes: "It is wonderful to be able to say whatever you want to, but it is terrible to realise that you no longer know what you want to say or what you should say – to see that contemporary art is no longer needed in our new society".<sup>20</sup> One can find the experience of being instrumentalised on all sides; criticism and artistic critique has turned into a spoilt subject. Under this light Irit Rogoff proposed a new term: criticality – as a reflected form of criticism and critique.<sup>21</sup>

As I already wrote, problem number one and two of artistic criticism/critique are the authoritarian formulation of the concept of truth and the voluntary and involuntary complicity with a system that is criticised. The first desires to get rid of contradictions, revealing the truth beyond them. The second requires a reduction of complexity: certain aspects are picked up and others, in consequence, are suppressed. This, however, was already sufficient to guarantee the continued legitimisation of the socialist and capitalist system. But contradictions cannot be that easily smoothed as the example of socialism shows nicely – and probably this was one driving force to push the totalitarian socialist system into a collapse. To push certain codes into a position of dominance, to define the meaning of cultural forms and the relation of that meaning to reality, to suppress all alternatives, opens to conflicting directions, opens to an "against" or "for". In actual fact, different truths (the official and the dissident) were competing with one another, they commented each other and held sight with the other perspective. All this happened as a by-product for sure – the aim was certainly not to produce contradictions and collisions. The other case mentioned above, the transformation and reduction of artistic criticism/critique originally formulated in an emancipatory sense in relation to the necessity of accumulating

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<sup>18</sup> Art was a means of state propaganda, but it also offered a screen on which images of resistance could be displayed – by way of taking an opposing stance. The level of interest in art was consequently extremely high overall – both in establishment and opposition circles.

<sup>19</sup> Not only was interest in art privatised – social protest also came to be individualised.

<sup>20</sup> Ciobanu, Mia, in Niedermayr, S. and Scheib, Ch., *Europäische Meridiane. Neue Musik Territorien in Europa* [European Meridians. New Music Territories in Europe], 2003, p. 52

<sup>21</sup> "In 'criticality' we have that double occupation in which we are both fully armed with the knowledges of critique, able to analyse and unveil while at the same time sharing and living out the very conditions which we are able to see through. As such we live out a duality that requires at the same time both an analytical mode and a demand to produce new subjectivities that acknowledge that we are what Hannah Arendt

capital implies that the suppressed elements have nevertheless not disappeared. They can be retrieved and activated at any time and form a tension between several options, which can be conflicting and competing as well. Probably we should put aside the authoritarian formulation of the concept of truth and look closer to this double/multi-bind, which produces contradictions, not only into consideration but as a strategic point of departure. How can we produce contradictions consciously for the sake of a critical debate? Instead of claiming truth there would be a shift towards discourses of truth, accepting *and* setting up (conflicting and competing) alternatives in thinking and acting.

Art is surely not *per se* critical. It can function as a critical agent and as an affirmative authority and therefore is contradictory in itself. It can offer and promote alternative points of identification to those of the current ideology and create room for dissidence, thus undermining a given hegemony and challenging the dominating and dominant consensus concerned consistently and continually. It does run the danger of losing itself in complicity with a capitalist logic of exploitation and of nullifying the "critical distance" (Jameson) that is necessary in order to make the ideological discourses and mechanisms that underlie society comprehensible and open them up to attack.<sup>22</sup> Art cannot take up a counter-position in the sense of an "outside," and artists surely don't know things better but must put a critical light on its own economic potential, and consider the possibility of its own appropriation. Art can, however, create a critical-reflexive space that retreats from functionalism and usability, displaces existing evaluations and interpretations, questions the meaning of stereotypes, but also emancipatory images, stories, and symbols within our society, and also how these can be commented upon and corrected. This defiance does not remain constant, but instead must continually be recreated. The capacity to resist, seen in relational terms, requires a "readjustment" of critical artistic strategies and forms of expression, a permanent putting-things-into-relation in any given new social situation or context.

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has termed 'fellow sufferers' of the very conditions we are critically examining.", in: Rogoff, Irit, What is a Theorist?, 06-04-08, <http://kein.org/node/62>

<sup>22</sup> Jameson, Frederic, Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, London, New York 1991