

Value of Critique— Different modes of ent: critique and

Isabelle Graw, Christoph Menke (eds.)

THE VALUE OF CRITIQUE

Exploring the Interrelations of Value,
Critique, and Artistic Labour

NORMATIVE ORDERS

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The Value of Critique

Normative Orders

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Preface

This book is based on a conference that took place on January 18th 2017, a date that was overshadowed by Trump's inauguration.¹ It shouldn't come as a surprise that this historical turning point finds an echo in many of the contributions in this volume. The title of the conference *The Value of Critique* connects two different modes of judgment which are often understood as being fundamentally different: critique and value (or evaluation). While judging is in itself an act of critique that implies a decision between right and wrong in the name of a rule², it can also be conceptualized and performed differently as an evaluation that generates and presupposes values.

The process of judging is thus deeply interconnected with critique and value. But what is at stake in the juxtaposition between 'value' and 'critique'? When described schematically their relation would unfold as follows: *critique* is the enlightenment strategy of judgment whereby a subject establishes itself and declares its autonomy as an independent judge above and distant from the matter of its consideration. To criticize in this sense means: to gain freedom over and against an object, a situation, a condition, in short: over and against the world by claiming that the world is contradictory in itself. The concept of *value*, on the other hand, refers to an act of evaluation which is openly and avowedly partial and perspectival—the act of measuring, in which a living being expresses the utility of something in the world *for it*, i.e. its survival or its flourishing. Evaluation is about the enhancement of the evaluating living being, about increasing its life-forces, its ability to live.

Understood in this way, critique and value are antagonistic. *From the perspective of value*, critique is a strategy used by the subject to empower itself,

1 The conference was a cooperation between two institutions both based in Frankfurt am Main: the Research Cluster "The Formation of Normative Orders" at the Goethe University and the Städelschule Academy of Fine Arts.

2 Both, the German term "Urteilen" and the Greek source of "critique": *krinein* (κρίνω), include the meanings of judging, dividing, as well as distinguishing.

merely pretending to let “the thing itself” speak. *From the perspective of critique*, the model of value has surrendered from the start to the endless circle of the immanence of life, be it biological or economical, and thus merely stands in the service of self-preservation or -empowerment. “Critique” is an attitude of negation: of judging and thinking as the unfolding of the inner negativity of its object. “Value”, on the other hand, is the name of an attitude of affirmation: judgment as an expression of the way in which a self says “yes” to its existence and its conditions.

At second glance, however, the relationship between value and critique turns out to be much more complicated. Instead of being just polar opposites, both concepts share a metonymic structure: critique refers to an object that is outside of it as much as the critic might be deeply affected by it. A similar displacement occurs in value since there is no “intrinsic” value as Marx already underlined. Value is relational and therefore always to be found elsewhere. Its force depends on the investment an affective collectivity contributes (actively or passively). Apart from its metonymic nature value needs to get represented and objectified—it has a form and this formal dimension renders it similar to the objects of critique.

Considered as social practices, critique and value thus overlap in manifold ways. For as soon as the critic selects an object as worthwhile of her interest and time, she has declared it as being potentially valuable. The critic, although often against her own intentions, indeed contributes to her object’s value. It is precisely by questioning existing values, that critique gets implicated in the formation of value. Practices of evaluation, on the other hand, are never merely affirmative and enhancing. For their *modus operandi* seems to be partly critical: to establish and foster a value means to engage in critical strategies of distinction and decision. As much as critique without value becomes empty and pointless, value without critique become blind and loses its edge.

Despite critique’s strength as a relational concept, it appears to have lost its transformative power in an economy that is supposedly busy absorbing it. Although we acknowledge accounts of an ongoing commercialization of critique, we opted for a less totalizing (and less pessimistic) take in this conference: We distinguished between different types of critique and aimed to analyze their respective *situative* potential. Starting from Luc Boltanski’s “sociology of critical practice”, Bruno Latour’s “critical proximity”, Rahel Jaeggi’s “immanent critique”, up to Beate Söntgen’s “aesthetic critique”—each of these models indeed presupposes a different notion of critique, a

different understanding of its values. The virtues and limits of these models are further addressed by the respondents: Benjamin Noys, Dirk Setton, Martin Seel, Kerstin Stakemeier, Eva Geulen, and Juliane Rebentisch. Each one of them honor and question the contributions in a challenging way.

Some of the propositions of the main speakers are anyhow at odds with one another which leads to further controversies. For instance: Bruno Latour blames *social critique* for not dealing with geopolitical issues, arguing for “critical zones” where an ideal of “critical proximity” should reign. Luc Boltanski, by contrast, insists on a model of social critique based on distance and the ability to contest institutional authority. Both Benjamin Noys and Dirk Setton note in their responses how Latour’s “geopolitical critique” resembles the social critique that it wants to overcome. Boltanski’s faith in a critique that is able to question institutional authority is questioned by Juliane Rebentisch: she wonders what happens to this type of critique of institutional authority once it turns right wing?

Whether critique should be based on distance or proximity is equally contended. Rahel Jaeggi’s model of “immanent critique” demonstrates how proximity and distance can actually go hand in hand. While emphasizing “immanence” this model of critique also presupposes “distance” as Eva Geulen points out. Furthermore, as Thomas Lemke asserts, critique, by being immanent, is always in danger of becoming “technical and procedural” and thus needs a transgressive moment on which its political force depends.

There is further controversy about the stance that a critic should take: should she opt for affirmation or negation? Taking Diderot as her case study, Beate Söntgen argues for a model of critique that affirms art *and its* (critical) subject. Kerstin Stakemeier replies that she would rather opt for negation against affirmation. Martin Seel raises the question of to what extent and in what sense art criticism is to be understood as an activity at all—and shows that its liberating power lies precisely in the way it is passive activity (or active passivity).

What becomes obvious in all of these controversies is critique’s ability to develop its own criteria, criteria that are different from the values that critique produces. It apparently still matters *how* critique is argued even if there is a complicity with the current power technologies to a certain extend. Instead of endlessly deploring this complicity, the contributions in this volume demonstrate how critique evaluations *differ* from those acts of evaluation that are implied in the concept of (economic) value.

But since there is no value without human labor—as the critique of political economy has convincingly argued—the volume also examines the value-labor-complex in a roundtable discussion between Sabeth Buchmann, Isabelle Graw, Christoph Menke and John Roberts. At first there seems to be agreement between the participants as to the nature of artistic labor: the current convergence between artistic labor and general labor in a post-Fordist economy is something no one disputes. However, the consequences drawn from this state of affairs greatly vary. For Sabeth Buchmann the merging of specific and general labor leads to the rise of rehearsal formats in contemporary art. While acknowledging the current overlaps between artistic and general labor Isabelle Graw insists on the specific privileges still associated with artistic labor. For her, it is these privileges combined with the material uniqueness of the artist's singular product that underlie the artwork's special value-form. John Roberts take on artistic labor is quite different, since he characterizes it as “free labor” and maintains that art is not entirely subject to the value form. All the participants consider artworks as products of labor and thus as commodities, but there is disagreement as to what kind of commodities they are. For Christoph Menke the relationship between art and commodities is one characterized by both difference *and* identity. While following Adorno's characterization of artwork as an “absolute commodity”, he locates art's critical potential in its ability to absolutize the value-abstraction. In Robert's account art commodities are much less than “absolute commodities”—he defines them as “incomplete commodities” because of their inability to be exchanged against capital. Graw on the other hand considers artworks to be ‘commodities of a special kind’: while sharing features with ordinary commodities, they remain nevertheless special because of their ability to substantialize the illusion of their value.

Taken together, the contributions to this panel demonstrate how the intrinsic connections between value, artistic labor and the art commodity can be conceptualized in different ways. Critique here functions as a contractor that not only examines the tight nexus between value and artistic labor, but also transforms critique in (manifold) theories of value.

Isabelle Graw/Christoph Menke

I. Critique of Critique

Against Critique, For Critique

Bruno Latour

Although I'm not against critique, my paper has been put into a section called *Critique of Critique*. Critique is not a topic I have worked on very much apart from one single paper to explain why "it has run out of steam". So, I'm slightly worried that the other authors might not be happy because I'm asked to write about a topic, I tried to convince Isabelle Graw I know nothing about. Nevertheless, I applaud the undertaking of having a symposium—to which this essay belongs—on the *value of critique* on the 18th January 2017 the day before the United States of America enters an extraordinary deconstructionist effort that will probably lead to its own irrelevance and maybe demise by inaugurating the new president. The tragedy of this inauguration is something, which I'm keeping in mind while writing.

Four forms of critique

I want to shift the attention to the word 'critique' by distinguishing four understandings of it: one innocuous enough, and the other three are more troublesome. The first meaning I will investigate is the one which was alluded to by Isabelle Graw and which is essential for any art school.¹ In this meaning art, cinema, theatre and literature are studied, and critique plays a vital and pragmatic role in the testing and tasting of the works of art. It guides them on their trajectory towards the public. From the sociology of science as well as the sociology of art we know that any work of art needs critique in order to advance and flourish. The key feature of this understand-

1 See Graw (2019): "Working Hard for what?".

ing of critique is its pragmatic sense of reflexivity. It is based upon a learning process: by drawing conclusions from the outcome of the experiment, the reaction of readers, or the reactions of the artists themselves to what is said about their work, the subject itself will undergo a modification. It's a positive, pragmatic, and reflexive definition of critique, which brings about these feedback-loops, which can be called learning curves. I have no objection to this understanding of critique.

Now, I'm aware critique is used differently in other traditions two of which are very important. In one of them critique is used to denounce an unbearable state of affairs. This use of critique is reminiscent of Voltaire's attacks on the church. It's a form of critique Luc Boltanski and his colleague call "the affair": it's the possibility for people to *take risks* and insist on taking risks in denouncing a state of affairs and *trying to modify the situation* in question. What is historically important and still relevant today is that this second form of critique doesn't require much reflexivity nor is especially connected with taste and testing. On the contrary, it's an activity turned entirely toward action: if it has no consequence on the state of affair, which is being denounced, we are allowed to say that it is not a good form of critique because it didn't modify the situation. I have no qualms with this second meaning of critique and I am always impressed by the importance of it in the present world.

The third meaning of critique played a central role especially in Germany. I'm talking about the transcendental view on the conditions of possibility as Kant pursued in his inquiries on moral statements and aesthetic judgements. When we discuss this kind of critique, we tend to forget that Kant first engaged these questions late in his life. Before that he was primarily teaching natural sciences. To use a technical language: the conclusion that the transcendental condition of any possibility as an origin point is fundamentally true in theory, had only been reached after years of practice and through a lengthy development. It's only after years of teaching astronomy, geography, anthropology, and all the other sciences, that Kant came upon the conditions of possibility and introduced a reversal in the order of things. This is often forgotten by philosophers when they hold that the conditions of possibility are to be seen as the beginning of things—although it's always the opposite, it's always the last step. My reservation about this third meaning comes from this reversal: it would be nice to learn the conditions of possibility of any event, but since they are always visible after the event, they are no more relevant than the proverbial hooting of the owl.

In effect this third meaning has a high-cost and a low-cost version. The former is practiced, of course, by Kant. Uncovering the conditions of possibility requires much time and work and it is often much later in life when one begins to be interested in the consequences and the conditions of possibility of some state of affair. But there is a cheap version of this form of critique which philosophers have unfortunately taken to, especially in France. It could be summed up as: “We’ll only layout a (theoretical) foundation as the rest is of no real importance.” This is merely a technical transformation of Kant’s form of critique into a cheaper version of it. It suffers from an indifference to the pragmatic condition of a discipline, namely to the sciences of activity and to the cultures at work. We can see this cheap critique in action when some philosophers look down at others, e.g. anthropologists or sociologists, by saying: “I see what you’re doing, but wait: what and where are the foundations in your considerations?” The irrelevance of this sort of critique is due to the uncertainty on what role “foundations” are supposed to play in any state of affairs.

The only meaning of critique I oppose is a fourth one, because it is politically relevant, especially at this time in the American election cycle. I’m not talking about a pretentious, ‘highbrow’ form of critique. Instead I’m aiming to point out a ‘lowbrow’ form. When someone uses this fourth meaning of critique, it is implied that there is a sort of division between “mere people” and “an authority” the former mocks and derides. The “mere people” see themselves criticizing the elite on behalf of the people. Although it’s a powerful form of critique which has always existed, hardly any books have ever been written about it. Nevertheless, it constitutes a very important part in the history of the way the people relate to the higher-ups in any domain. Now what reasons do I have in bringing up this fourth form of critique? It plays a significant role in the inauguration of the United States presidency. There we are entering a completely fact-less and post-truth state of derision accompanied by a powerful and strong form of resentment. (The catchphrase seems to be: against political correctness).

What has happened to critique, I think, is the immense decrease in its cost. With a social medium and an internet connection, you may criticize everything for almost nothing. This is why critique as such has run out of steam. If I am against critique, in that sense, it is because it has split this legitimate activity into a ‘costly’ version on the one hand, and a ‘cheap’, tawdry on the other. Hence, the denunciation of a state of affair, what I called a Voltairean type of critique, has a costly and a cheap version. The latter can