

**The report on the course and outputs of the art criticism international conference**

The international conference, which took place on 22nd September 2017 at the DOX – Centre for Contemporary Art, was organized by the Arts and Theatre Institute in cooperation with Arts Council Norway. The event was initiated by the Ministry of Culture, Czech Republic and supported by the Norway Grants. The conference was attended by invited professionals, who were selected regarding their balanced representation of art disciplines (theatre, film, music, literature, dance, visual arts), roles (critics, artists, researchers) and media types (TV, radio, journals, dailies, internet platforms). There were 42 experts and artists participating in four discussion tables – two of them were in Czech and two of them were in English. The conference was of an international character due to the participation of nine professionals from Norway, Iceland, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia.

The conference opened with the speech of Kateřina Kalistová, the Deputy Minister of Culture, and Petr Fischer, the managing director of the Czech Radio Vltava. Karla Hofmanová’s longer speech followed as she organized the first conference on theatre and music criticism in Brno in October 2016. Mrs Hofmanová spoke about general topics, the core and meaning of art criticism (how an artist perceives it, what artworks are, the role of a critic, the vanishing space in dailies, the state of journals as well as the possibilities and pitfalls of criticism on the Internet). She spoke about criticism as a management tool (how cultural organizations utilize it, critics’ independence) and marketing (she mentioned the absurdity of the act on state-funded organizations, which could not provide gifts, thus no free tickets for Czech and foreign journalists; the majority of municipal theatres and other cultural subjects are state-funded organizations): at the end, she mentioned the absence of strategic support of art criticism in the Czech Republic and the potential to solve the situation “from below” through a joint platform for integration and enforcement of interests.

Sindre Hovdenakk, the Vice-President of the Norwegian Critics’ Association, outlined the situation in Norway. The media situation has dramatically changed in Norway in the past years, the circulation of dailies has dropped by

80 % as they transformed to digital platforms, which has been reflected in the decrease of space and work for independent critics, who usually write for dailies. However, the situation has become stable recently and main dailies maintain the standard space and quality for art criticism. It is probably thanks to the state financial support of dailies with the nation-wide impact with the amount of about 40 million € per year. Journals also show stability. The state support of art criticism is rising. Critics in Norway can now make use of 10 work grants/scholarships in Norway (there was only one program several years ago), which is about 25 thousand € per year. The private foundation for culture support earmarks 20 thousand € for critics. Critics’ Association reacted to the onset of digital platforms by establishing an online platform where all the members can post their contributions. The project now seems to be partly successful and its future form is being discussed. However, copyright, definition of target groups and content balance are current issues. Despite a rather positive point of view of the state of play in Norway, Mr Hovdenakk drew attention to the fact that independent criticism virtually does not exist because it has to rely on external sources of money. He also pointed out attitudes of some politicians, especially the current Minister of Culture, who considers criticism to be anachronic because, according to her, it is the audience who should decide about what is worth seeing or not.

Natália Kovács, the PhD student of theatre criticism in Budapest, described the alarming situation in Hungary at the end of the first block of lectures. The Hungarian story was selected on purpose to draw attention to the fact that some states (the EU members as well) do not deal with the dynamic change of the gist of art criticism defined by the current social revolution, but they have an issue with the essence of criticism – the freedom of speech. In Hungary today, being critical means being the enemy of the state (or nation, Hungarian or Christian values). Attila Vidnyánszky, the appointed director of the national theatre, was set as an example as he has decided to terminate “the terror of criticism” and prevents critics from entering the theatre. Another example in Natália’s presentation was the new director of the Theatre Academy, who also founded the alternative critics’ association and the new *Szcenárium* journal, which does not sell well but receives twice as much money from the state than the well-established and respected *Szinház* journal. The last instance may be public labelling of Arpád Schilling, the theatre director and Krétakor theatre director, to be the “national security threat” because there have not been any performances in his theatre, but people had discussions and were active.

After the introduction, discussion in four groups, each with about 10 experts, followed. The discussion was backed up by rather extensive materials, which summarized well-known and stereotypical opinions on the current state of art criticism. The summary worked like a commencement or springboard for the constructive interpretation of the discussion to foreshadow possible future solutions. In the last panel, discussion tables moderators attempted to summarize the most important opinions, impulses and possible solutions of how to improve conditions for art criticism. The round tables discussion could touch upon the issue of strategic support participants can discuss in their associations, other relevant subjects and meetings.

Jana Návratová, the moderator, head of the ATI Dance Section and dance critic, divided the outputs of her “Czech” table into two groups: practice sharing or “Czech grumbling”, and solution proposals or “Norwegian dreams”. The first group embraced weaknesses of current criticism/critics: bad writing quality, insufficient knowledge about the international events in the field, low awareness of the development of other fields, skepticism about new technologies and new communication tools (vlogs etc.), and the inability to provide them with corresponding and intellectually momentous content. The attention was also drawn to the lack of interdisciplinary cooperation, low distinction and insufficient social visibility, low fees and precarization (being a critic as a full-time job is almost impossible today). Speaking about education, participants agreed on the insufficient education of authors, which effects the inability of university graduates to have an opinion of a work, they are not able to express themselves, they are oversensitive to editing, which they mix up with censorship. The “grumbling” concluded with a statement that the importance of criticism can be compared with the importance of an artist, but the extent of support for criticism does not correspond with support for production. Speaking of “Norwegian dreams”, the participants agreed on the need of support of critics’ mobility and their participation in festivals, support of informal education and mentoring, technological literacy support (as in new tools = new opportunities), support in interdisciplinary cooperation within the critics’ community, and setting the regime of a multi-annual magazine support by the Ministry of Culture. The table articulated the generally beneficial principle of a “criticism by the selection” and was proposed as an online platform with important reviews together with reviews from other fields (medicine, business, cosmetics) and no advertisements. They also suggested to introduce a subsidized public printed medium (a printed parallel of television and radio). The output of the discussion is also the following motto: “To overcome the atomization of society with knowledgeable popularization”.

The moderator of the “Czech table” was Martina Pecková Černá, the head of the ATI International Cooperation Department and theatre researcher. She asked the participants of her table first: “What troubles art criticism: the absence of theoretical starting points, the economic and political situation in media or the state of art and its perception by society?” The participants identified the issue of the demand and economic situation (small space for criticism in media), too many periodicals, fragmentation, chaotic nature and reclusiveness of media to be the main problems. They also drew attention to the situation in academia, where criticism is not acknowledged in evaluation of research, job precarization, the unclear role and work of public media (they should be the realm of art criticism, provide objectivity, cooperate with external workers, and provide the base at the same time). New media “undermine” critics’ authority. They have to be open to criticism of their own writings, find their style and keep their integrity.

The participants also spoke about specific features of the relation between criticism and readers/artists. They observed that there is no research in the Czech Republic focused on readers and their preferences. The issue of clientelist relations and the fact that everyone knows everyone. The function of a critic is to cultivate the discussion and keep the balance of the system; criticism has to be able to compare, it is not awarding points but reasoning. As the representative of the Ministry of Culture was present as well, there was a discussion about the executive power authority. Critics are often evaluators in grant committees for the support of art and their decisions are seldom respected, which does not contribute to their prestige.

The participants suggested possible measures, such as support of art journals by the Ministry of Culture (to preserve support as defined by disciplines and fields, and to settle the support of multidisciplinary journals), the need for better operation and communication of current professional organizations (according to them, it is not necessary to have an umbrella organization for all disciplines on the national level), support of monitoring of events in art through critics’ mobility on the national level (the Slovak Theatre Institute served as an example). They also mentioned the need for international communication, support of the professional growth, translations of foreign works, and communication across the disciplines and fields (e.g. theatre critic’s opinion of an artwork). They also recommended the support of research of the art criticism state in the Czech Republic and establishment of art criticism as a scholarly output as well as looking for the precautions against the abuse of critic’s good reputation (taking author’s texts out of context for PR purposes).

Moderator Przemysław Witkowski from the Krytyka Polityczna association summarized the discussion conducted in English: “In the time of the EU permanent crisis, we need criticism more than ever before. On the other hand, the amount of money provided by the state for culture is decreasing but they are directed at lavish events rather than continuous and basic activities. Critics are constantly ostracized from main media and stored in golden cages of journals, sophisticated language and academia. We discussed the means it could be improved and made pleasant for Europe and art criticism as such. According to almost all participants, the main issue is the money. The subjects of criticism were small amounts of money as well as the means of their distribution across disciplines and environment. Little financial support and its distribution force the artists, curators and critics to fight against themselves without long-term prospects. Critics often live in a social bubble, echo of sophisticated terms and philosophical connotations with the lack of will to present their work to the general public. Critics also do not utilize new media to present their approach towards artworks sufficiently. Some participants – and not only those from Eastern Europe – mentioned their problems with the political power and influences on their work, which lead to censorship and self-censorship. What can actually improve the situation is to adapt the language to the readers’ current abilities and to use new media more – such as podcasts, blogs, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and vlogs; to cooperate internationally, to solve common problems internationally and to self-organize.”

The second “English table” was managed by Sindre Hovdenakk, who summarized answers to prepared questions. The answer to the first question (whether artists, audiences and the general public need criticism) was unanimously positive but the participants agreed it is necessary to abandon clichés of common criticism and academic stereotypes, for which a theoretical basis and a public discussion about art may be helpful. It is essential to bear in mind who the critics write for and to be able to surprise their readers with something new. Criticism plays an important role of a mediator between artists and audiences. Artists need criticism to make their works visible as negative criticism also brings attention to art and helps its impact. The question of professional criticism was discussed as well, and the findings said it is impossible to find criteria – it is more about critic’s reputation and his/her close relation to the discipline/field/industry. This is linked to the surmise that critics still live in the past, when an artwork was still a value and not part of the market. Speaking of the topic concerning the characteristic features of various kinds of media, participants commented on the fact that media decide how critics write but the question is whether the critic should conform. Critics should remain critical and honest, but they should also ask the question how the analytical approach influences the readers. On the other hand, it is ok to write for the audiences and artists as well.

How do new technologies influence art criticism? Do social media replace the traditional ones? It is happening very fast, texts are published and forgotten easily. On the other hand, it is prestigious to have a lot of Facebook fans. The Internet is suitable for long texts, not for the short ones only. The impact of criticism on the Internet can be significant, but still: if you believe the Internet too much, you can expect the echo effect.

Speaking of the strategic support, the need for grants in criticism and networking was highlighted – to create a joint platform for enforcing common interests.

The representatives of the new Czech Writers Association were present at the table as well and mentioned that the question was discussed during the establishment of the association, but it was not agreed on as many people thought it is necessary to keep the distance between artists and critics. Other participants highlighted that a network across disciplines would be convenient, but it is necessary that critics feel the need.

Generally speaking, participants perceived the event as positive. Some of them shared their observations immediately after the event or as part of the feedback the organizers asked for.

Many participants highly appreciated the opportunity to meet and discuss. Artists present evaluated the event positively and they would welcome the opportunity to “confront” the critics. Many participants also appreciated the materials with questions and most common answers as being motivating for opinion cultivation.

Regarding the interconnection of disciplines, there was no unanimous opinion: some people pointed out the differences, which should be discussed separately, yet the positive reactions to the opportunity to meet across the disciplines prevailed (“The most interesting point was the opportunity to confront my experience with representatives of other disciplines”). Some people appreciated the international span of the event and the opportunity to discuss problems with the experts from abroad. Many people referred to a vast selection of topics and the need to touch upon more specific questions and topics, and the need for bigger discussion space.

As the impulse to organize such an event came from the Ministry of Culture, Czech Republic, and the department, which manages Norway Grants with their new program being prepared, we consider it important to summarize the most important observations for the strategic support of art criticism. However, the issue of the strategic support did not only concern Norway Grants but our Czech sources as well.

- support of criticism and critics (increase in current state funds)

- art journals support

- support of critics’ mobility aiming at their participation in art events (festivals, fairs, performances, exhibitions, etc.) in the Czech Republic and abroad

- support of informal education and mentoring, including competences in new technologies and social media

- support of international cooperation

- support of translations of foreign works

- support of networking; professional and multidisciplinary platforms

- support of interdisciplinary cooperation

- support of research on the state of art criticism in the Czech Republic and establishing the art criticism as a scholarly output

- support of measures against the abuse of critic’s good reputation (taking author’s texts out of context for PR purposes).

- support of knowledgeable popularization

- introduction of the joint online platform of the “criticism by the selection” across art and other disciplines

- support of the public printed medium

On behalf of the Arts Institute: Eva Žáková

