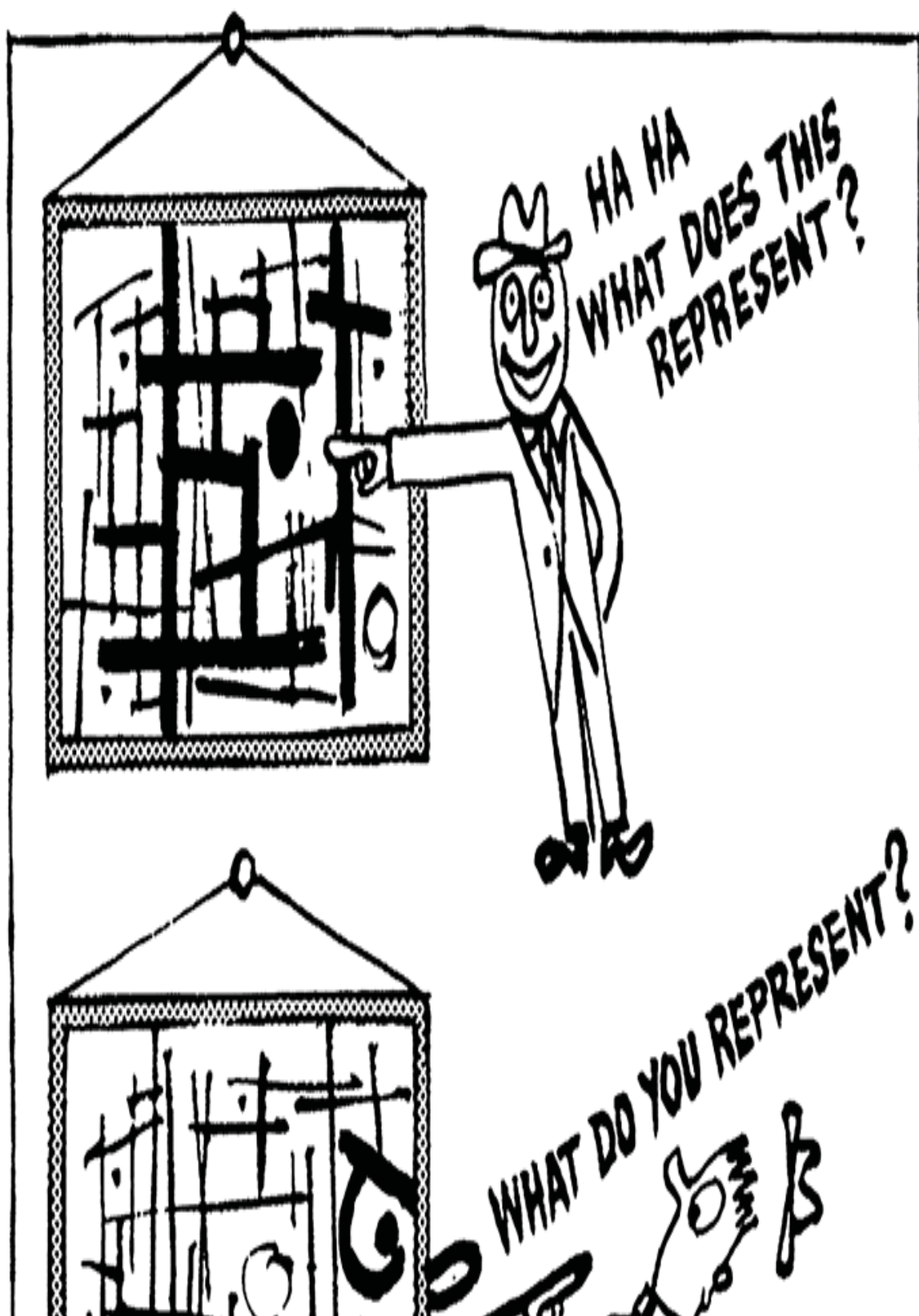


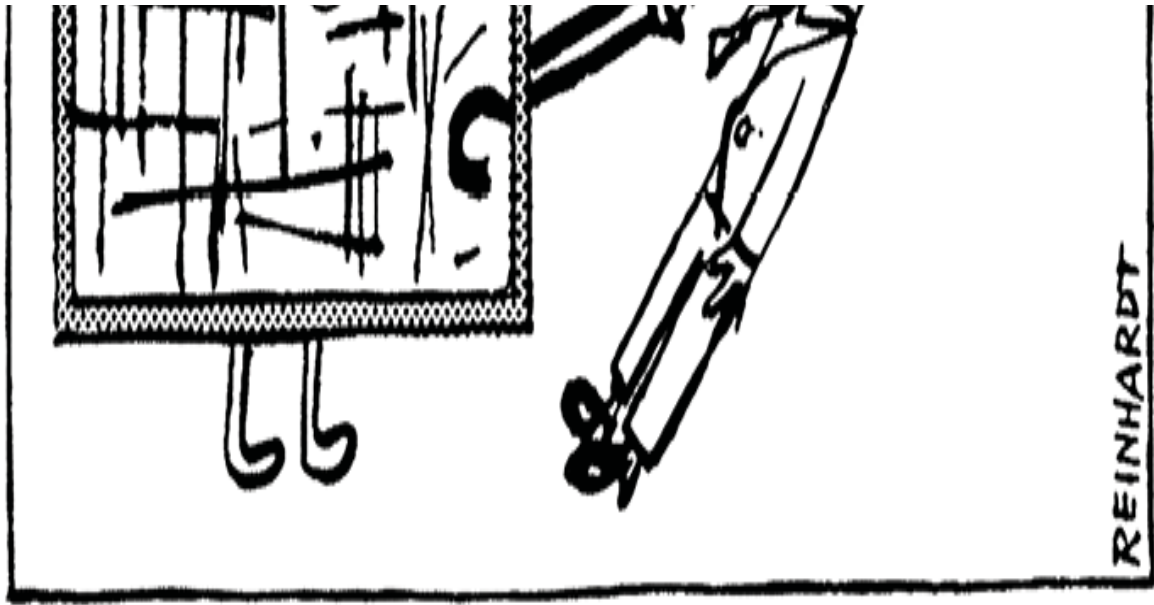
Why Art Criticism?
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Why Art Criticism?





Ad Reinhardt, detail from "How To Look at a Cubist Painting," *PM*, January 27, 1946

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A Reader

Beate Söntgen and Julia Voss, eds.

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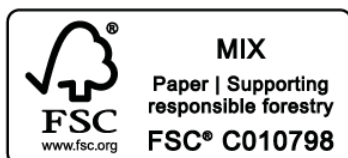


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Foreword

Studies on art criticism's history and definition—on its protagonists, its significance, its death or at the least its frequently diagnosed crisis—are many and manifold. But few books have gathered the actual raw materials: the critiques themselves, which, after all, are what make the concept of art criticism tangible, lending it concrete form and vitality. This reader thus gives such form to the phenomenon of art criticism via critical exercises and practices. Forty-six voices of art criticism are collected here from across four centuries. The gathered texts have appeared in both analogue and digital form: in newspapers, magazines, journals, and blogs; in popular media, catalogues, and academic publications. From the outset, we wish to avoid any misunderstanding: this reader may begin with the eighteenth century and be arranged in chronological order, but our aim is not to narrate a history or genealogy of art criticism on the basis of particular examples. We are rather seeking to provide a taxonomic account of the variety of art criticism's forms and roles.

From our perspective, the need for a reader of this sort is clear for two reasons. First, art criticism is often discussed in the singular, but it is historically and presently as varied as art itself. Only by setting out the many and manifold roles and forms, styles, modes of writing, genres, and the diversity of its criteria and domains to which it lays claim is it possible to arrive at a more precise notion and definition of art criticism. Second, and from an entirely pragmatic perspective, the reader offers material for examination and analysis in art-historical pedagogy, and as a suggestion or even possible model of contemporary and future forms of art-critical writing.

Soon after we decided to compile a reader several years ago, it became clear that it could only become reality as a collaborative project, undertaken with other experts. The present reader is thus based on an international workshop—*Cultures of Critique: Forms, Media, Effects*, held at Leuphana University Lüneburg in 2019, to which we invited specialists from various geographical and intellectual backgrounds to offer brief commentaries on the art critics of their choice. They explained why the chosen texts are important to them, what the texts stood for at the time of their writing, and what they stand for now. The approaches taken to the various critical positions are therefore personal ones, as the brief introductions to the source texts in this book show. To avoid resorting to texts already rendered into English and canonized, we chose to commission a number of new translations. While the publication has brought further art-critical positions into play, we do not seek to provide a systematic index or even a complete overview. Based on the contributors' suggestions, our book encourages readers to engage with points at which art critics of various provenance intersect, and also where they differ from one another. We ask readers delve into texts from eighteenth-century Paris; nineteenth-century London and Dresden; the twentieth century's New York, Buenos Aires, Delhi, Moscow, East Berlin, and Beirut; and the Kinshasa, Nairobi, and Tokyo of the twenty-first. Please also note that while all commentaries consistently use American English, in the source essays we have chosen to retain idiosyncrasies regarding translations, academic citation formats, punctuation, and regional forms of English, all of which underscore the sources' heterogeneity.

Our profuse thanks are due to all the authors collected in this volume for their contributions, both for the art critics they have selected and for the illuminating commentaries they have written. We would also like to thank our publisher, Hatje Cantz, for their keenness to include the reader in their

program, and Lena Kiessler for her outstanding support in putting together the volume. Kimberly Bradley has been an inspiring and thoughtful editor. The reliable hands of Catharina Berents held together the many threads of this intricate and complex undertaking. We owe much gratitude to the translators Angela Anderson, Brian Richard Bergstrom, Ralph de Rijke, Tiziana Laudato, Stuart L. A. Moss, Francis Riddle, Matthew James Scown, Bela Shayevich, and Katherine Vanovitch, and to book designer Neil Holt, picture editor Jennifer Bressler, and production manager Vinzenz Geppert. For their support, we would like to thank the student research assistants of Leuphana University's Research Training Group—Jette Berend, Marie Lynn Jessen, David Mielecke, and Katharina Tchelidze—and the group's office manager, Stephanie Braune. Finally, particular thanks are due to the German Research Foundation for its generous financial support.

Beate Söntgen and Julia Voss
Lüneburg, August 2021

Why Art Criticism? An Introduction

Right now, the voices calling for criticism, value-apportioning evaluation, and intervention are urgent and loud, in both social and academic contexts. “On the life of criticism”—the title of Ruth Sonderegger’s¹ study, highlights the topicality, vibrance, and power of criticism while also shifting the focus away from the definition of terms and concepts and toward critical practices. But art criticism—a critical praxis that has mostly sought for and established relations to social phenomena—has had a difficult time of late. Even if no form of criticism is ever without its own crisis, recent attacks have been particularly intense, striking at the very foundations of art criticism. This introduction explores those attacks, with the hope that the panorama of art-critical positions collected within this reader can also vividly demonstrate the value of art criticism for the present time.

A peak in these condemnations occurred in a 2002 round table hosted and printed by—of all publications—the journal *October*,² which, since its launch in 1976, has been one of the most important organs for critical reflection on art. *October* does not merely cultivate a politically engaged style; it also defends the use of strong criteria. And it is these which (according to depressing reports) have disappeared, having gone the same way as categories of classification. Some lament that art criticism has lost its independent voice; has become an art-industry mouthpiece and even a scribe to the royal court of the arts; mere applause for the artistic voices that the critic is promulgating. Given the dominance of the market in the artistic field, it has been said that neither discursive space nor knowledge of context are still required. There are no

longer any utopian visions, and thus no social ones.³ Criticism would therefore always participate in inescapably problematic processes of canonization that affirm social conditions and serve the market in equal measure. The skills, responsibilities, and fields of critics, historians, and curators have intermingled; art criticism has allegedly lost its ability to make judgments, reduced at best to interpretation. Many critics are blamed with having literary pretensions that compete with art and seek to seduce through language. Criticism thus either acts in sales mode, or fosters romantic notions of fusing the critical text with the object of critique.

October has made a significant contribution to focusing attention on art's potential to be critical in its own right. The *criticality* of artistic work quickly became the key marker of value in art.⁴ Art criticism has perhaps dug its own grave: if art is critical, who needs art criticism? What can it add to art? What can criticism produce that art cannot produce itself? Beyond this, artists themselves also write, framing their work critically and formulating critiques of other artistic positions. The fact that criticality has become a market value in art does nothing to improve things.

This fierce attack from a Western flagship of art criticism is not the only one the latter has been forced to endure. Feminist, postcolonial, and decolonial arguments have, with good reason, cast doubt on one of criticism's core tasks—judgment—while to the same degree raising questions about the related concept of the Enlightenment notion of the subject.⁵ The rational, Western, overwhelmingly male subject of criticism has apparently suppressed the physical, sensual, and affective elements of the critical act, disparaging them as purely subjective. An awareness of the ever-varying situatedness of those speaking would therefore be indispensable; this awareness, however, would make it possible to define the generally valid criteria that are

required to make a judgment, at least in terms of any potential generalizability. There also remains the urgent question of who is ultimately permitted to speak for whom, and in whose name,⁶ especially when it comes to socially engaged criticism.

So what is to be done with art criticism? Especially in view of the widespread diagnosis that the transformative power of (art) criticism is disappearing, Isabelle Graw and Christoph Menke assert its necessity and value; the freedom that can be found in an act of distancing that is aware of its own participation and even its entanglement in what is being criticized.⁷ The relational concept of criticism they have proposed and that Graw has further pursued in collaboration with Sabeth Buchmann involves reflection on one's own discriminations—both in the sense of discerning and distinguishing differences as part of the critical act, and in terms of the exclusions that each act of differentiation must entail.⁸ Given that art criticism refers to a subject matter—the artwork—that is in turn the result of a sensual, reflexive act that articulates itself in specific materials and media, we feel art criticism has a unique potential to take what has often been excluded from the Western notion of criticism—the affective, the physical and sensual, the involved—and showcase it as part of the critical act.

There have been intense discussions in recent years on how to reach transculturally informed understandings of an art that is subject to globalized conditions. Only recently, however, has the significance this expanded art field has for art criticism come into consideration.⁹ The journal *Contemporary And* is named here as an example, initially presenting and discussing art from African perspectives. It has since founded a second magazine focusing on Latin America.¹⁰ Our reader is an attempt to bring diverse voices and perspectives into conversation with each other, but to do so without claiming to be comprehensive, nor to provide

a systematic index or illustrate the history of art critique through model texts by its most important purveyors. We see this reader neither as an expanded canon, nor as a new anti-canon. Our aim is rather to create a renewed awareness of the historical and contemporary plurality of art critique; to demonstrate its value and diversity as a genre and highlight what it has to offer to social discourses.

Criteria

Among the authors included in this volume, Stefan Germer emphasizes the necessity of forming criteria, even if the problematic nature of generally binding critical yardsticks and normative decrees is very much at the fore. For Germer, art criticism's role and function is to make distinctions and review them—and even go so far as to evaluate them—in relation to both artistic-aesthetic questions and sociopolitical ones. This not only addresses the content-form debate—that is to say, the question of how the subject matter of an artwork is determined by the form and medium of representation or placed in a certain light;^{[11](#)} it also speaks to an aporia, vital among other things to the formation of criteria, that exists within modern art or at least what is regarded as avant-garde. This aporia plays an important role in many of the contributions gathered here: namely, the question of how artistic criteria should be linked to political issues.^{[12](#)}

Within the avant-gardes of around 1900, there were demands for art to intervene in life—even to merge with it—and to therefore counteract the impotence of an increasingly self-referential art. But to have any kind of potency as art, even the avant-garde must assert a right to autonomy; to an at least relative self-governance and liberation from any other purposes and vested interests. However, this results in a disentanglement from the social and a loss of potency. The question of the relationship

between art and politics has vehemently returned to the stage, especially with the attention paid to global entanglements in the artistic field.¹³ This is linked to the challenge of defining the criteria that can still be used to assess artistic works, given that the possibility of making normative justifications and the fiction of independent criticism have both reached their ends.

Another important criterion is in which (socio-)political issues are picked up on, made visible, problematized, or criticized in artistic work. Whether sexism (Annemarie Sauzeau-Boetti, Adwait Singh), racism, or post-Fordist labor relations (Melanie Gilligan, Aruna D'Souza); commodity fetishism (Walid Sadek), social change, and environmental destruction (Arlene Raven); territorial struggles (Helia Darabi, Lothar Lang, Marta Traba, Igor Zabel), or war and its cultural consequences (Ješa Denegri, Sadek, Luis Vidales); art criticism's task in each case involves highlighting the means and persuasion with which each of these sets of issues is articulated.

Art critiques that place form in the foreground of their reflections cannot dispense with commentary on what has been expressed in a particular form, even when they insist on a pitiless self-reflection on artistic materials, media, and procedures. The spectrum ranges from the communication of creative, spiritual power (Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, Roger Fry) or authenticity (Victor Hakim) to expressions of the body (Roland Barthes, Patrick Mudekereza, Francis Ponge) and questioning the appropriateness of a form in relation to its function (Clemens Brentano/Achim von Arnim).

A differently incisive criterion for exploring the interconnection of art and politics is the social value imparted via artistic form and artistic practice. Even where self-exploration through aesthetic experience—as it was understood from an Enlightenment perspective—is seen

critically (Gilligan, Peter Gorsen), experiences of community are showcased either through artistic production itself (Coomaraswamy), via collective artistic practices (Raven, Vidales), or via shared experiences in the (self-)perception of artists (Denegri, Sauzeau-Boetti).

From his place on the left of the political spectrum, Peter Gorsen supports the provocative position that art should not be at the direct service of society. Rather than advocating for the rejection of the culture industry, he pleads for pleasure—and explicitly not in the sense of bourgeois pleasure in art. Gorsen instead demands new, (un)productive forms and experiences through art, to be generated within the framework of non-instrumental networks. He thus addresses a criterion utilized in equal measure both by art criticism and in artistic-critical practices: particularly addressing the cultural, institutional, and economic conditions in which art is produced, received, and distributed (Lawrence Alloway, Mary Josephson, Oscar Masotta, Hito Steyerl, Julia Voss).

We have covered only some of the central criteria (and these by no means represent all art-critical criteria) deployed in this volume. They hold their ground with remarkable persistence, from the beginnings of modern criticism in the mid-eighteenth century up until the present, and across cultural, political, and intellectual divides.

Tasks and Roles

Having problematized judgment as a task of art criticism, the question arises of what other or further roles it has, given that many critics remain wedded to judgment as one of criticism's core roles. Hal Foster made a number of suggestions in the aforementioned *October* round table;^{[14](#)} art criticism could, for instance, work archeologically to bring what has been buried, suppressed, and forgotten to light. Not only a memory-related role, but also a political one

would therefore be evoked. By changing the focus and shifting the subject of attention, art criticism can also govern processes of canonization—and is also able to shed light on the justifications and categories behind these processes. According to Foster, art criticism can also take an explorative approach, researching figures at the margins of the art field and, in the most high-impact case, even establishing a new paradigm for evaluating art. With such a tableau of tasks, however, the already-blurred line between art criticism and art history becomes even hazier.¹⁵ This reader, however, does not seek to mark boundaries; its aim is rather to make visible the variety of tasks and roles that art criticism could assume.

It remains a key function of each form of criticism and of art criticism in particular to intervene in artistic and social fields and to raise objections against any such restrictions. Given the increased attention being paid to the globality of the art field, many art critics feel it important to give hitherto neglected tendencies and regions their own voices (Darabi, Sadek, Zabel), to probe territories anew (Denegri, Traba, Vidales), to highlight hierarchical structures, power imbalances, and inequalities (D'Souza, Traba), and to unfold new narratives at the same time (Darabi, Allan Sekula, Zabel).¹⁶ Two Latin American critics illustrate how these evaluations of hegemonic structures in the art field can or should be countered. Traba separates the Latin American art scene into open and closed areas; into areas open to Western influence, and ones that have insisted on their own autonomy. While she preferred “closed areas” due to the identity-creating power of art (see also Coomaraswamy), Vidales advocated a generation later for an opening to US artistic practices—an opening the critic hoped would lead to a revitalization of art in Colombia and an increased attention being paid to Colombian art, as part of an art understood as universal. This optimism about globalization is one that

Vidales shares with a number of others, such as Zabel or, to a more limited extent, with Darabi. Critiques of humanism can be found from decolonial, feminist, and queer perspectives (Coomaraswamy, Sauzeau-Boetti, Singh, Lynne Tillman). This is a context in which representational or identity-centered arguments are often accompanied with the assertion of stigmatized or neglected categories—the artisanal, material, and spiritual (Coomaraswamy, Sauzeau-Boetti), the affective or the physical (Mudekereza, Raven, Tillman).

Art criticism's mappings of the artistic field often come in the wake of wars and the formation of new political systems (Denegri, Lang, Sadek); here, art criticism is ascribed not only a documentary/archival role (Vardan Azatyan, Hakim, *New Culture* magazine, Sekula), but also a very diagnostic, politically orienting, or even world-changing one (Alexander Rodchenko, Mark Sinkler, Sergei Tretyakov). This empowerment of the collective—against the grain of the humanist, Enlightenment notion of subject-creation through art—is a task frequently assigned not just to art, but also to art criticism: the latter would thus be capable of emphasizing the *assembling* power of art—its ability to bring people and concepts together—and its transcultural potential, but also its potential to create cultural, national, or political identities (Coomaraswamy, Denis Diderot, Fry, *New Culture*, Raven, Sauzeau-Boetti, Traba, Vidales) and to create networks (Alloway).

These notions and processes are often viewed critically, however. The social and economic conditions and exhibition politics under which art operates are analyzed from institutional-critical positions, as are the ways the various protagonists understand their own roles. Events behind the scenes are brought to light—how commissions are granted, for instance (Berta Zuckerkandl). Exclusions in the form of gatekeeping, value-generating network creation (Claire Bishop, Masotta), and infrastructural constraints

(Mudekereza) are addressed, as are race, gender, and class discriminations (D'Souza, Josephson, Peter Richter, Sinker, Singh) and questions of representation itself (Darabi, Rodschenko, Traba). Institutional issues are often spoken to in art criticism written by artists; these critiques provide a theoretical background to the artistic works of their authors, while at the same time explaining it, expanding upon it, defending it, or even undermining it (Masotta, Gilligan, Steyerl).

The translation of artistic issues and the strengthening of their impacts was already present as a concern in early art criticism (Diderot, Brentano/von Arnim) and is taken up anew and in different ways in the twentieth century (Barthes, Fry, Julius Meier-Graefe). Others set a different emphasis by observing where artists and critics share common strategies and alliances—whether shared concepts, values, and ideas (Sauzeau-Boetti, Sadek), comparable economic situations (Ponge), or the blurring of lines between roles with the aim of disrupting hierarchies. Some critics focus resolutely on addressing a broader public audience (D'Souza, Hakim, Lang, Tillman, Traba), something which depends not least on the publication media and also impacts their styles of writing. This also demonstrates how valuable art criticism is in discussions of social structure and urgent societal and political questions.

Styles and Modes of Writing

The question here is which manners, forms, genres, styles, and modes of writing art criticism can use to bring its interventions and its value to bear. All criticism is bound to the forms and media in which its descriptions appear,^{[17](#)} but criticism does not merely reconstruct its subject matter; it is rather the modes of representation, the styles, and the media that highlight particular aspects of the subject matter and the conditions surrounding it, placing it in a new light.

Criticism always spotlights, frames, and illuminates its subject in a specific way; in doing so, it also creates visibility for the process of critiquing and the situation in which it takes place. Criticism thus implicitly or explicitly also addresses the techniques and processes of critical description; these are in turn participants in the constitution of the subject matter as it appears within critique. This means that when the mode of description changes, criticism's subject matter changes, too.

By way of its subject matter alone, art criticism knows the power of representation, as one of its tasks is evidently to describe and examine that very power. One of this reader's aims is to highlight the diversity of art-critical modes of description and/or representation and their effects; we thus asked the authors of the commentaries to speak to the peculiarities of the various styles and modes of writing they selected. According to Roland Barthes, these differ in the following ways:¹⁸ style is a "self-sufficient language"¹⁹ which, based on linguistic conventions and grammatical norms, unfurls from within the writer. Regarding the mode of writing—Barthes's translators called this *literary form*—we speak rather of the relation between the written and the social; Barthes speaks of "literary language transformed by its social finality,"²⁰ the "morality of form."²¹ Art criticism refers to an artwork, to a materialized approach to the world that has taken form; and it addresses an audience. This means that art criticism is writing that refers to an outside in two ways, yet can be shaped by an author's will to write in a particular style.

The relationship between self-sufficient modes of expression and reference to the subject matter, world, or society always varies in how it plays out. In the early days of art criticism around 1800, it was often understood as a space in which the artwork resonated (Diderot, Brentano/von Arnim); a notion that one hundred years later