

The Value of Critique

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The Value of Critique

Exploring the Interrelations of Value, Critique,
and Artistic Labour

In cooperation with Thomas Cannaday

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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

be seen in cases where *no risks are being taken* by those who are denouncing a state of affair. At the same time their reticence leads to *no effect whatsoever* on the things being denounced. If I want to be really mean, I would say that there is an inverse relationship between the increasing price of attending a good American University and the decreasing price of that sort of critique. It's cheap in terms of effect because there is absolutely no risk, everybody understands the circumstances, and this constitutes no sort of "affair" whatsoever. This always marks a sad turn of events, where critique itself seems to be downgraded, devaluated. We don't need to preoccupy ourselves with this more than we have to. It's important to at least mention it because this is what the Americans often call "theory". Whenever I hear colleagues say that they teach theory, I am afraid they sell this sort of cheap and no risk form of critical denunciation that makes students feel good and superior—albeit with no consequence.

Opposing this fourth sense of critique, I want to, with Donna Haraway, introduce an approach that is not critical distant but has *critical proximity*.² The way I understand and use critical proximity is that it does not allow the use of idealistic foundations as a way to dismiss or to disregard the empirical and practical disciplines nor is it cheap and easy. When teaching critique, especially art criticism as in this case, it's important to stress that its practice doesn't require foundations but a lot of learning curves and a lot of experiments. Henceforth, critical proximity will be the only meaning of critique I will use in the rest of my paper.

So, how do you build feedback loops from full experiments in order to get closer and closer to the purpose of an artwork by using critique, art critique. The same goes also for science critique—something I have practiced for many years while accompanying and watching the development and the interests of the scientists themselves. I have used this critique technique in a project on modes of existence which I'm not going to expand on here.³ To finish this part on the value of critique I want to point out two other significant aspects of critique: its historical and situational value. As I started to study science, 30 to 40 years ago, the opponent was a kind of extended and fairly cheap, but well-entrenched positivism. We had to do something about it because everybody believed that once you have figured out what the facts are, everything else would follow. 40 years later, the questions and the op-

2 See the unpublished paper: Latour (2005): "Critical Distance or Critical Proximity? A Dialogue in Honor of Donna Haraway".

3 Latour (2013): *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence*.

ponent are entirely different, seeing that the belief in scientific authority has lost its persuasiveness.

The value of critique cannot be abstracted, distilled from any historical situation. If a person is in a situation where the danger stems from an overstraining faith, or too much common sense, or an overstretching and all-consuming positivism then critique plays, of course, a vital role in distancing oneself from the suffocating and all-absorbing corporate and technical discourse. But the situation is entirely different today. We are in a field of ruins where we no longer have to try to add some sort of pluralism to a suffocating and unified state of affairs. The problem is rather an excess of pluralism, or a complete chaos and indifference to any position whatsoever. I don't like the word post-truth. I think it's a journalistic simplification. Yet still, it's interesting to see how the journalists make use of it: there was an article in the *New York Times* the other day. Someone calculated how many minutes during a year of U.S. television the presidential campaign was about political issues.⁴ They counted the minutes broadcasted by all networks combined and ended up with *thirty-six minutes* where people actually were presented with issues. The rest was how Trump reacted to Clinton or how Clinton reacted to Trump—thirty-six minutes of issues in the whole year, all networks combined.

It is not so interesting to exert critique in a situation by taking your distance and debunking another position. I have worked with this sort of criticism a lot in the 2002 exhibition *Iconoclash* at the ZKM, Karlsruhe.⁵ The question I asked myself was: how did the iconoclastic gesture, which had been so important in the history of Europe, become so counter-productive? And what had been clear in 2002 is now even more counter-productive.⁶ If there is a value to and from criticism, it finds itself now in a completely different situation, where it's not about debunking, breaking down, about iconoclastic gestures or the hammer of criticism falling and destroying idols because all

4 In 2008, the three broadcast networks, in their nightly news programs, devoted over the entire year a total of three hours and 40 minutes to issues reporting (defined as independent coverage of election issues, not arising from candidate statements or debates). In 2016, that plummeted to a grand total of just 36 minutes. ABC and NBC had just nine minutes of issues coverage each; CBS had 18 minutes. Therefore ABC and NBC each had less than one minute of issues coverage per month in 2016. Those figures come from Andrew Tyndall, whose "Tyndall Report" monitors the news programs. See: *Nyt* 1–17 kristof.

5 Latour/Weibel (eds.) (2002): *Iconoclash. Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art*.

6 Latour (2010): "An Attempt Writing a 'Compositionist Manifesto'", *New Literary History*, 41 (3), pp. 471–90.

idols are to already deconstructed. Of course, you still can add a little dust to dust and break down broken idols. It's still an amusing activity. And it's still taught on American campuses, as I said, at an expensive price, but it's not really interesting. The task nowadays has changed. It's a task of *composition*. It's a task of recomposing slightly sharable, vaguely common definitions of a world in which we live. So, we have to be clear that we are faced with the question of the value of critique in a completely changed situation. We come from a time where idols were everywhere and the courageous thinkers were the ones breaking these idols. Now we are in a situation where the idols are all broken and the poor, intellectual critique tried to assemble, re-compose something, which would be slightly solid for a few days. But this is not the same task as it had been and I think I needed to say this before laying the subject of critique to rest for the time being.

The struggle for the value of critique

Now, the question I'm interested in implies two shifts in the meaning and therefore in the value of critique. We still cherish a notion of social critique that has been practiced over a 75-year period. In the meantime, while we were constantly honing, reflecting, and bettering social critique, another completely different front presented itself all the while the better of the left were indifferent to it. This front encompassed a contradiction between the state of the earth and the social conditions of production. My problem with critique is that as soon as we needed it, social critique was busy with so many other things, that it did not see the major issue that should have captured its focus.

In order to make my point, I will refer to Polanyi and his book *The Great Transformation*.⁷ It's very interesting to see that when he published it in 1944, he was absolutely convinced that we were facing the end of the autonomous market. His whole book is about how we end WWII and the series of catastrophes from 1914 to 1945 by freeing ourselves from the ideology and utopia of the autonomous market. What Karl Polanyi saw was the emergence of a society *resisting* this market religion. This resistance was firstly expressed in the field of labor, the second opposition came through money, and the

7 Polanyi (1944): *The Great Transformation*.