

# Fulcrum

ISSUE 85 - FEBRUARY 17, 2014 - CRITIQUE

## the crisis of criticism.

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It is useless to complain about the temporary absence — or even the final death — of criticism in architecture, as in any other sector of society. And it is not even enough to say, as is often done, that every epoch has the criticism it deserves, since criticism is the well-calculated product of every epoch, and therefore there is nothing tending towards the “fatal” in the relationship between the two. Critique of architecture, more than the critique of other disciplines, reveals this relationship for the simple reason that

**architecture, more than any other cultural “product”, is heavily involved with business interests and markets. This is the reason why for some years now architectural magazines have stopped any really critical activity.**

From this point of view the Italian case offers a very interesting model, since Italy is a place where architectural criticism has always been highly developed. During the “heroic” era of twentieth century architecture (the twenties and thirties, but also, albeit with different features, the first decades after World War II), architectural magazines took clear and highly motivated positions; “militant” positions which involved not only the support and defence of their own “party” but also the censorship — and in some cases the actual attack — of those “parts” considered enemies. In this regard, you might mention the Italian magazine *Quadrante*, founded in 1933 by Pier Maria Bardi, an ardent defender of rationalism, polemically adverse to every kind of “traditional” architecture (the same Bardi who in 1928 exhibited the famous *Tavolo degli Onorati* (see reverse) at the “Mostra dell’Architettura Razionale” in Rome); but also *Casabella*, edited by Alessandro Mendini at the beginning of the seventies, that supported the diffusion of radical design and was fiercely antagonistic to the conception of “bourgeois” architecture.

Later, in the eighties and nineties,

criticism was often expressed through analysis that did not necessarily have a single point of view. A good example of this trend is the quarterly architectural review *Lotus International* that, from the late ‘70s to the present day (but especially during the eighties), under the direction of Pierluigi Nicolin and with the help of an interesting editorial board (Gae Aulenti, Oriol Bohigas, Mario Botta, Francesco Dal Co, Kenneth Frampton, Vittorio Gregotti, Christian Norberg-Schulz, Joseph Rykwert) and prestigious contributors (among them Maurice Culot, Rem Koolhaas, Vittorio Magnago Lampugnani, Rafael Moneo, Werner Oechslin, Manfredo Tafuri, OM Ungers, Aldo van Eyck, Robert Venturi, Anthony Vidler) was characterised by a large cultural pluralism. Later, more and more, the coexistence of different points of view and a less apparent ideological commitment than in the past have emerged as defining characteristics of the era. And this hasn’t certainly silenced the expression of clear and precise positions.

Essays and articles published nowadays in Italian architectural magazines and newspapers, in most of the cases, lack of a true critical vision, and are rather the effect of a game of balance between dumb exposition of the phenomena and absence of any thought.

Compared with the critical situation of criticism on paper journals one might think that the right answer could be found in the web: to paraphrase Walter Benjamin, one might say that criticism today makes up in spread what it has lost in depth; but if for Benjamin himself the loss of distinction between author and audience in the Soviet press of the 1930s was a sign of progress — not only in a political sense but also in the perspective of a literary technique — the transformation of today’s internet users and social networks into “authors” and “critics” does not promise to be greeted with an equal enthusiasm.

Manfredo Tafuri, in a well known 1986 interview with Richard Ingersoll, explained the problem by saying “there is no such thing as criticism, there is only history.” Conversely, on the web today there are only (or most of all) personal opinions.

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## reconsidering criticism.

g. baldwin

*The aim of the artist would be to give viewers information. . . . He would follow his predetermined premise to its conclusion avoiding subjectivity. Chance, taste, or unconsciously remembered forms would play no part in the outcome. The Serial artist does not attempt to produce a beautiful or mysterious object but functions merely as a clerk cataloguing the results of his premise.*

Sol LeWitt

Artist-as-critic and the work of art-as-criticism allows for a reconsideration of the roles and functions of both the critic and criticism.

Setting out to compose a critique, the critic must experience his subject; he must read, see, feel or hear its presence. His recording of this experience should not change the subject in itself, but change how it is evaluated. His work is premised on translating, or presenting, the same subject through other mediums. What he composes may take a new appearance, it may appear tangible and clear, or it may appear foreign and distant.

He composes something to question, establishes a discussion and creates a distance between himself and the viewer.

What is perhaps most important is that the expression of the work he produces is not determined by himself, but by the audience who interprets it — the audience that is themselves able to impose new meaning into the work. This is criticism in its most ideal form.

**When criticism can perform as a work of art and the critic can remain in his position as a composer, criticism can remain as an affective discourse. The ‘crisis of criticism’ is the criticism where the author oversteps his position as an artist.**

This author interferes with the subject, changing its form before evaluating, imposing biased insights and corrupting its translation into art or criticism.

The only sign or tracing of the author that should be present in criticism is style, as a product of experience, left to be discovered by the audience. But the crisis of criticism also transcends the identity of the author and is in fact located in the very mediums and techniques the artist chooses to work with.

The artist or critic must use a technique appropriate to the presentation of his specific subject. This raises the question of how to redeploy, reuse or evolve a given medium in order to define a composition — indeed, to structure the work’s significance or intention.

Mediums in written criticism perform similarly to those in other artistic mediums (by translating how the subject is addressed or presented) and can take the form of rhetoric, speciousness, cynicism, sarcasm, or realism. These mediums produce different levels of clarity when reading the work, and are used to construct the criticality of the work. The medium is also the device that the audience uses to dissect the work, in order to enter into the criticism. Furthermore, the productive use of mediums in criticism allow for the author to step away and create distance between himself and the audience.

Mediums in criticism affect not only how the work is read for a particular audience, but how it continues to resonate throughout time. Once a piece is composed, structured synthetically with critical techniques and an appropriate medium, the piece becomes a sort of stage or platform.

It asks a question, produces a sense of mystery, and it entices the reader to interact and project further discussion. If composed imprecisely, its resonance can be very limiting, diminishing circulation and ultimately rendering itself less significant within the discourse.

In reconsidering criticism as a form of art, criticism could be re-examined as a productive tool for advancing critical discourse and evolve out of its identity complexes and conclusive insights.

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"Tavolo degli Orrori" (Table of Horrors) by Pietro Maria Bardi, 1931.