

Andrzej Szczerski

Art history as art criticism?*

Whenever one tries to think about the essence of art history, inevitably the question of judgement comes to the fore. But what kind of judgement is it? Is it the Vasari type of rise and decline of values, the avant-garde search for transgression or the post-modern principle of multiplicity? What is the relation between the apparent objectivity of the collection of facts and figures and its inherent structures of evaluation? And finally to what extent is art history able to formulate judgements and to what extent they are conditioned on the one hand by art criticism and on the other by contemporary art?

When writing his seminal *History of Art Criticism* in 1936 Lionello Venturi set standards for the discussions on these issues. He emphasised the crucial role of judgement in art history. For Venturi art history was overly dominated by the neo-positivist approach, so “the historical facts, placed in series, even if most exact, lost their significance to the human mind, except to erudite curiosity, because interpretation of their aesthetic value was neglected”¹. For Venturi the crucial problem was, in fact, the lack of the consciousness that judgement was necessary. As a result, he said, history of art improvised the judgements instead of seriously and profoundly discussing them. Venturi was also convinced that in order to achieve the judgement one has to move between the borders of art history, art criticism and aesthetics. On the other hand art criticism which is based only on intuition and without any knowledge

*The text was first presented at the conference “Visions of a Future. Art and Art History in Changing Contexts” organised by Schweizerisches Institut für Kunstwissenschaft in Zurich (June 2002). Thanks are due to Professor Lech Kalinowski for his help and advice.

¹ L. Venturi, *History of Art Criticism*, New York 1964, p. 18.

of the theory is blind, too. To quote Venturi again “if a fact referred to is not considered as a function of judgement, it is perfectly useless; if a judgement does not rest upon a knowledge of the historical facts, it is completely false”². Finally, giving judgement such a crucial role in art history Venturi said “the history of art is a function of the criticism of art”³.

Venturi’s ideas turn our eyes to a crucial sphere in art history and should be re-examined. Above all they remind us of the role of the judgement in our discipline. Since the end of art history was declared art history has definitely changed its status and the scale of the problems it is willing to tackle. Even if some might find this development inappropriate it should be said that the new ideas enriched art history to unexpected degree. However, if we are to seriously benefit from these changes, we need to ask for the judgement related to them. If art history is to expand and include new areas of study we need to know if the fields it expands to are of any value. Even if we see the field of our study as a space for multiple occupancy, we need to distinguish between the occupants and their contributions to the field. Otherwise we could easily get a meaningless cacophony of no importance where the crucial proposals go hand in hand with worthless suggestions. The pluralism of interpretations should not mean that all of them are equally viable. Such eclecticism would then signify support for society without values or, worse, eventually for society dominated by one value alone.

We know very well that judgements are conditioned by various contexts, besides the social one, and cannot claim to be absolute. But at the same time they cannot be ignored. This applies to art history as a discipline as well as to the artwork, which does speak for itself. As Eric Fernie observed “the experience of works of art can be overwhelming to the extent that it is necessary to ask whether such powerful aesthetic responses could be summoned by any image whatsoever, given only the right suggestions and regardless of any characteristics of the object itself. When such positive responses are produced by particular pieces over generations it is reasonable to propose that this is due at least in part to something in the works themselves”⁴.

Judgement in art history is valid for discussions of the past but it is also valid for the present and for future developments. Since we have lost our belief in complete objectivity we have to admit that art history is of a narrative character. And as such it concentrates on the interpretation of facts, an inter-

² Ibidem, p. 20.

³ Ibidem, p. 351.

⁴ E. Fernie, *Quality in: Art History and Its Methods. A Critical Anthology. Part III Glossary of Concepts*, ed. E. Fernie, London 1996, p. 357.

pretation which itself creates those facts. This situation has a profound impact on the variety of cultural spheres, but probably most directly on the contemporary art scene. For much of the 20th century art consciously used the strategies of art history as one of its sources of inspirations. Although one should acknowledge the mutual influence of the contemporary art and art history on each other – this has been discussed in length by Hans Belting⁵ - I would like to emphasise the following issue: art historians tend to underestimate the importance of their judgements for developments within art itself, in all the various meanings of the word “art”, and within the domain of their discipline. On the one hand this has a short-term effect of allowing the mediocre or worthless production be treated as art and on the other a long-term effect of the destruction of the criteria for judgement, be it of the past or present.

Here, the connection between contemporary art and contemporary art history plays a crucial role. Contemporary art history is dealing with the phenomena trying to introduce new elements into the art discourse. Thus art historians are encountering the problem of the definition of their field of study – what is art and what is not. Simultaneously they learn from contemporary art what art could be and what values should be discovered in the art of the present and past. In this respect art history could be called both the prospective and retrospective discipline. When looking at the present it has to re-evaluate the past and at the same time set standards for the future.

But here precisely is the greatest challenge for the discipline. When talking about contemporary art, art historians too often tend to follow the well-established path of art critics. As Ernst Gombrich noted, the art historian comes after the connoisseur and the art critic. Art historians usually do not question the canon of crucial events in contemporary art life as elaborated by the art critics. Yet they should allow themselves some kind of independence from the actual context and contemporary art life. Those eager-to-find-something-new art historians who tend to follow the art critics in their judgements and write the most advanced art histories are just missing the principles of their discipline.

I believe that it is the art historian who should look carefully at the contemporary art scene and make judgements, which are not oriented towards “here and now” principles but which try to take into account a wider spectrum of the variety of questions. Art history could then play a role of art criticism but at the same time differ from it substantially. As a discipline entitled to make

⁵ H. Belting, *Das Ende der Kunstgeschichte*, Munich 1984 and Idem, *Das Ende der Kunstgeschichte. Eine Revision nach zehn Jahren*, Munich 1994.

judgements it should judge and should try to establish a certain criteria according to which judgement could be made.

At the CIHA Congress in Amsterdam in 1996 Anca Oroveanu summarised the debates on these issues in a paper entitled “The history of art shaping art?”⁶. She showed the two extreme examples of this phenomenon in the 20th century – socialist realism and postmodernism. In the first case ideology used art history as a tool to extract from the past the visual language most adequate to transmit the new propaganda meanings in the old form. This abuse of the discipline was generally realised through totalitarian methods. On the other hand the post-modern arts fell under the tyranny of the history of art. Here Oroveanu finds the long-lasting influence both of the Greenbergian discourse and the critical discourse of the avant-garde concepts and presuppositions. These relations, as she says, “are not necessarily and invariably liberating, but may be, under certain circumstances, limiting”. And since art history is the main carrier of the specialised memory in the field of art, its memory and its structuring “may act not only as a means of organising what would possibly remain, otherwise, a number of chaotic and disconnected objects and events, but also as a modelling factor”. Since art history structures the past “it also suggests how future facts of the same kind might fit in, and locates (even if implicitly) the contemporary artists into this scheme. In other words, art history deals not only with the past, which is, if one may say so, its ‘natural’ object, but also, explicitly or not, with the future”.

If this is true, then the role of judgement is of fundamental value for the whole development of art. If we understand judgement as evaluation, the most difficult thing would then be to establish the system of values relevant for such judgement. It would be too naïve to think it is straightforwardly possible. The artwork is a complex structure and requires a profound study, without any a priori prejudices. And not everything could be expressed with the restricted ability of the written or spoken language. But at least one may learn from art history that there are some points of reference when judging the artwork that should be taken into account and that it does not have to mean going back to a transcendent and universal notion of quality. For instance the method of comparative research did not lose its significance. At the same time the historical context is also a significant point of reference. We should also be aware of the fact that individual artists require individual approaches, even if in a larger context. And finally that aesthetics has for a long time ceased to be the only

⁶ A. Oroveanu, *The History of Art Shaping Art?*, in: *Memory and Oblivion. Proceedings of the XXIXth International Congress of the History of Art*, ed. W. Reinink, J. Stumpel, Dordrecht, Boston and London 1999, p. 123–130. All the following quotations idem.

source of values and should be combined with other spheres of influence for the artwork, e.g. its motivated expression in the political and social sphere. Although one may ask if art is not losing some of its critical value when it is overly immersed in the current socio-political life.

By way of example I would like to point to the double face of the notion of originality⁷. The critics of post-modern art refused to use it, as did the artists. The criticism of the notion stood at the centre of the post-modern approach to the traditions of the 20th century and to the traditions of all art history. As such the critique was a conscious part of the larger and complex vision of contemporary culture. This does not mean that the notion of originality lost its relevance, indeed, I trust it could still be given positive value. The concept of originality lies at the heart of art history and the constant changes in the arts. It does not belong only to the modernist utopia and, as an effect, to the post-modern repudiation of it. Originality is a condition sine qua non for creativity. I do not see it as a return to the idea of progress in the arts, but as a constant opening of new vistas for the arts. In this sense the post-modern questioning of the notion of originality was itself rather original and simply allowed us understand originality much better. Originality seems to be particularly hard to achieve in the globalised world, nevertheless globalisation, with its ongoing unification, could be the best stimulus for the return to originality.

Obviously it is not only art history, which is able to judge. Art criticism plays a crucial role in shaping the current debate. It acts as the spectator with all its rights to give answers to the art-works produced nowadays. But its major role is thus temporary and direct – art criticism does not have the wider perspectives of art history. Art history should differentiate from art criticism exactly because of its historical background and should look beyond for judgement. And it is precisely because of this, I believe, that art history also gives us the best insight into the most unusual experiments in the arts nowadays, particularly those which question the existence of art itself, trying to define the art anew. One can accept the transgressions while knowing what to transgress and if the effect of the transgression is of any value.

Art history is challenged by contemporary art to make judgements. I believe that it is fruitful for it to withstand this challenge and to perform the role of art criticism. And I trust this is also beneficial for art.

⁷ Cf. R. Shiff, Originality, in: *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. R.S. Nelson, R. Shiff, Chicago and London 1992, pp. 103–115.