

## **Black Holes. When the history is not written.**

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Who is a critic and what is his role? Philip Weissman wrote in his essay "The Psychology of the Critic and Psychological Criticism" (1962), the critic is "minimally required to be a connoisseur... When confined to the fields of artistic creativity, the critic must have a sound knowledge of man's art treasure, past and present... Ideally speaking, he should have an insight into the nature of the artist and the creative process, and how they are integrated." But "the step from connoisseur to critic implies the progression from knowledge to judgment."<sup>1</sup>

For me as an unprofessional art critic, who got educated as an art historian in the 90ies in Georgia, and shifted her carrier towards more practical work such as a curator focusing on projects with social engagements and community work, it was very interesting to research and discover all those discussions and concerns happening in relation to art criticism in recent years, and it seems these discussions started already in 1993 with an ICA discussion titled "Critical Responsibility: The Artist, the Institution and the Audience," not to be found any more, but there is an article by Edward J. Sozanski available where he reflects on the above mentioned discussion and summarises, that "a critic has a duty to be discriminating, perceptive and analytical, but not necessarily censorious. If effective, he or she can clarify issues, stimulate interest and call attention to worthy but obscure art... What is required of a critic is an opinion informed by historical perspective, experience, taste and a sense of fairness. A critic also has to be able to

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<sup>1</sup> The psychology of the critic and psychological criticism. / Philip WEISSMAN in Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association, vol. 10, n° 4 (1962)

communicate his or her ideas in reasonably lucid language, which is an acquired skill.”<sup>2</sup>

What is significant for me in those quotes is that an art critic has to have a good knowledge of the history of art and through judgment and analytical arguments, articulated in understandable language, communicate his/her ideas to audience in order to raise interest towards art that is valuable.

Time passes things change; political, economical, social systems change and approaches change too. Art we are dealing with in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has also changed. And it is especially interesting to look at this from Georgian perspective, where art until 1990ies was dominated by ideologically influenced works. Art that we take as an example is still predominantly western, thus generally new and unfamiliar.

For the past 20 years world art scene has also changed a lot – it is not concentrated only on Europe and USA any more, thus it became much more difficult to operate within boundless flow of visual information and complex context. Art from the so-called “third world” strengthened its position within global art market; however, there is a lack of theoretical ground for its presentation.

Unfortunately recent history of Georgia developed in such a way that in 90ies not many art theoreticians considered it valuable to stay in accordance with time and work parallel to artistic activities, which were very intense despite the political instabilities.

Situation we face today is that we not only miss the documentation of creations from that period (thanks to Guram Tsibakhashvili’s photo archive we at least have quite solid visual documentation of events happening during late the 80ies and 90ies. Majority of the works do not exist any more.

However, Georgian Curator Irina Popiashvili managed to collect part of the

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<sup>2</sup> Edward J. Sozanski, “Reflecting On The Art Of Criticism An Ica Discussion Raises Questions. A Major Thinker's Writings Shed Light On The Subject” (1993). [http://articles.philly.com/1993-03-14/news/25948756\\_1\\_clement-greenberg-institute-of-contemporary-art-imperatives-and-responsibilities](http://articles.philly.com/1993-03-14/news/25948756_1_clement-greenberg-institute-of-contemporary-art-imperatives-and-responsibilities)

works and make an excellent exhibition "Reframing the 80s" at the National Gallery in Tbilisi in 2012 showcasing art from that period. Exhibition was accompanied by photo documentation from above mentioned archive of G. Tsibakhashvili, which contributed a lot to a better understanding of content and context of the exhibition). Georgia also lacks theoretical analysis of art development after the fall of the Soviet Union. Art criticism as a profession is also relatively new in our context; during the Soviet regime profession taught at high education institutions was Art History without any critical component within fixed educational programme.

Generally the critic is faced with a choice: to defend old standards, values, and hierarchies against new ones or to defend the new against the old. In best case to re-evaluate an old art with a fresh understanding of it or to expose new possibilities of art and to explore new approaches that seem demanded. The critic thus has a certain power of determination over art history, or at least great influence in creating the canon of art.

Development of art criticism in Georgia unfortunately took a position defending old values. I by no means intend to underestimate invaluable work certain individuals were and are doing within the scene (Karlo Kacharava, Nana Kipiani, David Chikhladze, Khatuna Khabualiani...) but the general tendency is praising good old times and aesthetical values.

As already mentioned Georgian history of the past 20 years has not been documented and analysed anywhere. What makes it worse is that no one is able to write the monograph of the past 20 years. It would be productive if the research took place in parallel about different events and different media. It would be helpful if the materials were collected this way, for the different opinions to appear. But the question is not why no one does it today, rather why no one did it back then? Someone should have researched and have written about the events back then. Overviewing the events post-factum is not the only role of a critic.

The main problem with Georgia is that only very recently have the art historians started to interpret the contemporary art. They did not know the contemporary art, they did not know how to write about it, how to describe the methodology that existed out of the Soviet tradition. There is not a single methodology that would capture the event in here. At some point it became impossible for them to approach the subject and the easiest way was to ignore it altogether. It became problematic when the artists started making postmodern art and used the adequate language, the context was absolutely different; therefore, new methodology was needed to interpret and analyse it new methodology. Speaking from the position of a critic working analytically in Georgia, we come out of the Western methodology. This sometimes becomes misleading. However, the appearance might be very Western, the artistic form might be the same that you have seen and analysed previously, but you realise it is not the same. This is something else that needs different conception and new methodological approach is to be found.

Another problem is that during the Soviet system critical thinking was not welcome. While studying in Tbilisi State Academy of Fine Arts on the Art History faculty, it was nonsensical to question anything; the dogmatic theories were the only way, without any alternatives. This has stipulated the environment where criticism does not exist.

The other problematic issue is the need for criticism in the society; who is the receiver and for whom is it directed to? Georgian artistic scene is very small and closed; therefore, the blog posts and Facebook are enough for them. However, it is questionable how many of them do actually read the posts rather than just liking them. The dynamics of these 'likes' comes to it stating that I 'saw' the post. It becomes unclear and secondary if I realised and formulated my attitude towards what I've seen.

Coming back to the critique, taking Georgia as an example, there is hasty assumption about "nonexistence of critique". On the one side there is a

scanty amount of publications and the lack of critique, but another side is the audience. Those people who do not even get interested in reading texts keep on repeating this phrase. It is problematic, that there is no serious interest in critical thinking in the society. There is no desire to read a complex text, which won't be written on a populist language, which will try to be reflexive.

There is a severe problem of education. The obvious difficulty with the students is of reading a text. This to some extent comes from the Soviet methodology when most of the texts were to be learnt by heart; an ideological approach to literature. The toasting model has ruined the tradition of thinking. All of these has caused the appalling result when a relationship with a text and its reading is problematic.

Maybe contemporary art is not for the masses, but if a country has such aspirations, then the relevant art has to be taken in consideration, for example artistic reaction to something. A certain guru-type hybrid of an artist has formed in our society; a middle between romantic and contemporary, who creates relevant art which is liberal and democratic and is not narcissistic, who has a wise opinion about everything worth knowing. The biggest obstacle when socialising with Georgian artists is to understand their attitudes towards their profession.

There is an impression that for Georgian artists their professional and public lives are differentiated. One is a romantic understanding about an artist and their engagements in the studio and the second is their private everyday existences. Their surrounding is not reflected in their oeuvre, the recycling of the information does not happen.

The lack of the printed media defines the problems with art criticism as well. There are couple of magazines about the culture but they tend to be trendier and they do not have a specific profile or they are not directed to criticism. It is a big drawback for Georgia that the important texts, philosophies, sociological researches- all the writings of the postmodern time had not been

translated on time. Today you cannot translate the immense material that is preferable to be read. Not knowing foreign languages is a very relevant problem too; the new generation does not speak Russian, does not know enough of English or any other language except their native. There is no one who would finance the translation of the material; moreover no one is ready to read the vast amount of omitted texts when so many new things are being printed.

While speaking about criticism, we should not forget about the vital role of the audience; the way they apprehend the work or the project. The prefabricated frame that prepares and points at the reactions is different to the spontaneous, unprepared, uneducated reaction from the audience.

Today the role of art critic is dispersed among the critics, theoreticians, journalists, curators, artists and everyone has their designated roles in this system. It is important that not everyone should be preoccupied with describing the facts only. There are different types of curating; some work intuitively, some come out of the artist's position, some base it on theories and researches; different curatorial projects are interesting.

And the context remains definitive. Local artist might create an artwork employing the language of the contemporary art, internationally understandable and this will be interesting precisely for this matter, rather than being exotic. If there were critical processes it would be the criticism of the processes taking place in the consciousness. Nowadays, the artworks lack the depth and leave no space for interpretations. It is desirable to have a vigorous artistic activity, as it would contribute in searching for forms and contexts, even the political processes but unfortunately very few of these take place.

There are plenty of stereotypes around the criticism. The tiny part needs to have some kind of information about the contemporary criticism and even artists themselves have to be curious about the critical discourse.

And by founding and strengthening theoretical ground our visual art production will also have more impact within local as well as international context representation.

Thus finally how do we see the role of art critic and what new social tasks and status will criticism have in the future?

Is it to re-evaluate an old art with a fresh understanding of it?

Is it to expose new possibilities of art and to explore new approaches that seem demanded?

Is it to be objective and inform the public about the work of artists or an artistic project like a reporter in descriptive manner or through opinion with more analytical/critical approach?

Is it to create some sort of discourse about art?

Is it to create some sort of discourse about socio-political matters through art?

Is it to be educative?

Is it to define taste?

I suppose it can and should be all mentioned above. I think a critic should seek out a variety of types of work especially if there are not many art critics in a concrete city, region, and country. A critic should be able to have some opinion on the work and there should be a reason for that opinion. It should be argued. Critic should be able to explain why he/she like or don't like something and his opinion should be taking account on a specific context work is realized in.

I think most criticism is to discuss some issues the critic wants to discuss, where he/she finds his personal interest but critic also should find a way to

communicate it in understandable language not only for professionals but for general public as well.

And as for future task, I guess critics will also become multifunctional as most art professionals are. Probably critics will combine tasks of art historians, theoreticians, journalists, curators, but what should remain permanent in all they do is professional approach to the subject and professional as well as human responsibility towards society in informing, educating them and defining new tendencies and values for future generation.