

CRITICAL THINKING

Luis Camnitzer

I want to talk about critical thinking.

I am raising this issue because I don't believe that art making is possible without it. I am actually more extreme on this, since I believe that **any** thinking that claims the right to be thought should be critical. However, critical thinking alone is not enough; we also need a critical distance so that critical thinking functions the way we would like it to function, that is, critically.

This argument is not easy to carry over into the arts because there we enter two areas that to some extent try to annul each other. On one side we have that as artists we use art to vent many intimate things in which we are totally immersed: We are obsessive neurotics and our work serves to channel that energy. We suffer of overwhelming terror and try to overcome and tame it. We live in anguish and nostalgia that immobilize us and we try to calm and satisfy ourselves. In other words, a dispassionate critique really seems to be out of reach.

The other problem we face here is that, with some luck, these activities may provide us with good therapy. However, good therapy is not

necessarily good art. And worse, the therapy zone here is reserved to self-dialogue. I don't want to call it monologue, because monologues are not always listened to, not even by those who utter them. Self-dialogue, on the other hand implies at least one listener and therefore a degree of feedback. The artist talks and answers. He answers by erasing, by adjusting colors or even by destroying the work. Although the criteria in this case start using some critical distance, they are contaminated by the therapeutic function. The artist basically tells himself: "this is useful or useless to solve my personal problems." "If it is useful, the work is ok. If it's not, I make it again or forget it and do something else."

This is precisely the image we have still left from the romantic artist as defined in the nineteenth century. Accordingly, the artist presumes that if the work satisfies his own needs, it will also satisfy everybody's needs and, if it doesn't, tough luck. In that case it is the fault of the public, never of the artist. The artist placed himself in a sacred position. This position is amazingly consistent with that of capitalist liberalism during the same period. The individual's primary mission (or the country's mission as a collective ideology) was to satisfy either his manifest destiny or his talent to make as much money as possible and without worrying about other people. Since presumably everybody has the same right, if they don't use it only

they are to blame. Therefore those blameworthy, lazy, ignorant people deserve their poverty. One could say that what they truly want, their mission in life, is to work for those who define triumph as their own mission. This theory peaked towards the end of the twentieth century when Ronald Reagan declared that it was good for the rich to become richer because the excess of money would trickle down to those same poor people who didn't want to work to get rich by their own means.

The equivalent in art would be to say that the more neurosis the artist gets over, the better for those who are not artists. Which is probably true, although not in the sense we are discussing here.

I am describing one possibility of satisfaction the artist may derive from his work. But this satisfaction only pertains to one first zone. There is also a second zone, which is the communicative space that opens between the work and the observer. This area is usually referred to by the vague and obvious term "communication." What is interesting in this second zone is that from this moment onward, the function of the work is neither to satisfy the artist or the observer. The function is to communicate.

That the communication might be satisfying, unpleasant, bothersome, or pleasant, is secondary and unimportant. It only matters that something that roughly fits the author's intention will be communicated. This intention

is not necessarily equivalent to an explicit program. It may be an intention that we might, with some dangers, call intuitive.

I will discuss some aspects of this “intention” later on. For the moment I only will say that I would prefer if the word “intuition” was banned from art, prohibited. More often than not, the term is used to justify the laziness that separates us from explanation. I cannot deny that the intention for a piece of art can be defined by intuition. But intuitive or rational, what really matters is that there be a standard for evaluation that allows us to decide if the work process is on track. The existence and understanding of this standard is fundamental for good communication. In one way or another it will be used or misused as much by the artist as by the public.

It is in the decisions concerning communication where the artist becomes his own first consumer when asking: “should I proceed on this track or not?;” “should I correct this or that?;” “should I try again, but with other possibilities?” The artist is the first spectator, the first critic, and in certain ways also the first client. This is the moment in which he has to be able to step out of the work to see it, that is, to establish a critical distance. He has to take responsibility and can’t be in therapy anymore.

All this sounds like a set of truisms, except that it is something very difficult to do, especially during production. Critical distance becomes easier when time passes. With the work of other people it is even easier. But to maintain a critical distance at the same time one is working is rather difficult. The most accurate metaphor I found over the years is to be standing on the edge of the swimming pool watching myself swimming under water. It is an unfolding of personality like when one dreams and knows that one is dreaming and takes notes about the dream. If we take too many notes, we wake up and cannot return to the dream. If we remain in the dream, we cannot take notes, and in the end we forget everything.

The more rational part of all the things that make up the communicative area is quite manipulative. That is why the moralistic separation we make between fine arts and advertising art is spurious. Both activities are mercenary and it would be much better if we took responsibility for that. Words like *composition*, *harmony*, *palette*, *texture*, are nothing more than elegant euphemisms for the tools we use to manipulate the viewer. They are all devices that help control the reading of the work. But they also follow certain interests, they are used to persuade of something. Therefore, the means are similar in both the fine arts and advertising. It is the interests that determine the ethics of the work. If we

know that cigarette smoking kills and that doesn't prevent us from creating a magnificent ad that increases the sale of cigarettes, we are doing something ethically reprehensible. Both advertising and fine art serve a cause. It is the cause that determines the ethical quality, not the field of operation.

While I was an art student in Uruguay during the mid-fifties, there were many people that felt that easel painting was immoral. Murals were the ethical way to go. Today I would say that it is the opposite, that a bad mural can harm much more than a bad oil painting. A mural cannot be overlooked and that is why I favor people making small paintings. But during the fifties there was confusion between art and the ownership of art. An easel painting was bad because it could be owned by a person who, by definition, was rich, bourgeois, elitist and evil. A mural, on the other hand, was public property, and the public was poor and working class, and therefore was good.

There was a second critical distance operating then. It was a distance that allowed distancing oneself from individualist needs. By using ownership as one of the criteria, this distance underscored communication as something very important. However, it was a distance incorrectly measured and it only allowed for a schematic perception. Since that distance had an

ideological structure, one could believe in good faith that all complexities were taken care of; which is what ideologies are good for.

So, we can say that there are two categories of critical distances. They are different, even if they sometimes intersect. One is important for a critique of the artistic process. The other one functions in a social dimension and continues to operate long time after the work is finished. This fact doesn't preclude that it may or should feed back into subsequent works. Other important questions would have come to the fore if during those discussions in the fifties about the easel painting and murals one had measured issues in ethical rather than ideological terms. Among them we would have considered the possibility that evil elitist bourgeois might be re-educated. This means that the public that goes to the gallery has as much a right to be targeted by good communication the same as any other member of the public. Since the public that goes to galleries tends to have more power than the public that doesn't, that reeducation might prove useful.

Something else that would have become apparent then is that gallery-art probably has a bigger educational impact on the artist than it has on the public. The public that goes to galleries has fetishist expectations. They are connected with a respect towards works of art, in addition to a desire to possess them. The gallery exploits this and the artists are drawn into

satisfying this expectation. That artists may fall for this, only means that they are unable to establish a critical distance in regard to the institution “gallery” so to counteract the pressure.

And then there is the example of public art, which normally has a physical presence and totalitarian features that function independently of any explicit message. In the case of Mexican Murals for example, the mural would tell me that I should be fighting for my liberation and be free. At the same time it also forced me to look at it on a daily basis even when I didn’t feel like it.

It could be said that this second critical distance determined by the ownership of art is more sociological than artistic in nature. One may think that only the first critical distance is important for the artist, since it provides a manner of quality control. But this would imply that the artist should only be concerned with things that belong to a very narrow definition of art as a discipline. It implies that there is no room for social responsibility. However, from the moment we accept that art communicates—that the artist is saying something—that responsibility exists.

By saying something and functioning in a system designed so that at least a segment of the population listens or registers what we say, we touch on issues of distribution of power. The artist has the power to say what he

wants and therefore has to take into account the consequences and be responsible for them. The public, on the other hand, has the power to accept or reject, even to ignore that message. On a more subtle level, the public may force the artist to submit to rules to achieve communication. The ritual of galleries, museums and their intellectual guardians are a result of these rules. The relatively small amount of innovation we are allowed to introduce in our work at the risk of losing the audience is another.

It really doesn't matter if the second critical distance is artistic or sociological, since all this profoundly affects what can be said and how it is said. It has enough of an impact on the making of art so that the artist has to take it seriously and integrate it in the creation of the work. The second critical distance therefore is still operating today.

We now may return to the "intention" of the artist and how it manifests itself in the work. The idea of "intention" also has ideological implications. It presumes both free will and that we are the absolute masters of our own decisions. Any deviation from our ideal decisions can therefore be explained and justified. In art this supposedly is even more so.

Relatively speaking this is true. I used to define art for myself as my only truly "free territory," that is, the area in which I could be omnipotent without harming anybody. It sounds good, but it is not totally true. The

typical example of this attitude is the artist who declares that “I did it because I like it, and that is it.” Apparently there is no rule of accountability. Nobody can prevent me from doing what I want, and if somebody doesn’t like it, screw him. Taken to a political extreme and with more dire consequences one can quote a George W. Bush official who in 2002 commented: “We are an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality... We’re history’s actors... and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.”ⁱ

But there are two problems here. One is that if it is true that the work is communication and not therapy, the public should react to it and therefore there is accountability. Second, the liking part or taste is one of the criteria that least reflects freedom. We don’t really know why we like something, which means that by satisfying our taste we are disposing of our ability to decide. And the ability to decide is precisely what defines our freedom.

Granted that we still have the freedom to decide if we want to satisfy our taste or not. But generally speaking we like something because it is comfortable, because it shares qualities with things we know from previous experience and because we liked that previous experience. By satisfying our taste we are actually eliminating or reducing the possibilities of the unknown.

Except for very idiosyncratic cases, taste is a cultural construct. It is something collective we end up internalizing. As an example we may follow the history of miniskirts: an initial shock caused by the rupture with the past and a challenge to prudery when they were introduced by Mary Quant in 1965; then the skeptical acceptance followed by total victory once the need to wear it was created and it forced a sense of inadequacy for those who didn't. Rejection then started during the 1970s, once the market was saturated, and this was expressed with the assertion that it stopped being fashionable. Date and obsolesce substituted for taste, to later allow for a return, this time under the label of "retro." In each case taste was operating authentically, unaware of the manipulations of the fashion industry.

We generally talk about "personal taste," "acquired taste," and "manufactured taste." I would say that all these terms are synonyms and that they don't represent free will or freedom. *Taste*, then, is another word I like to forbid.

Going back to "intention," one way of formulating it is asking: "What is the problem I want to solve?" It is practically the same thing, only put this way requires a little more precision and rigor. It does not mean that we have to talk mathematics, like saying: "I want to add two and two." The formulation in terms of a problem can go from "getting rid of my anger" to

“changing the world,” “rendering the face of my aunt” or one of the more interesting problems available: “to achieve the absence of any problem.” This one is fascinating because it demands an instant and continuous critical distance. The artist has to continually watch for any emerging potential problem during the whole production process. If a problem is detected, the direction has to change immediately so that it cannot take shape. As soon there is the danger of harmony, it has to be disrupted; as soon an intelligible message threatens to appear, it has to be scrambled, and so on. Even the representation of chaos has to be denied. As a problem, the “total absence of problems” is interesting because it doesn’t have a solution.

I am interested in this way of presenting the issue for two reasons. The first one is because it forces the artist to be accountable. I don’t believe that art can be allowed to be the product of narcissism or self-indulgence, and I think that the artist has to be responsible vis-à-vis the public. This is even more so because the artist has the possibility of choosing the public. By deciding to either exhibit in a gallery or on the street the artist is not only choosing a space but also the public that will see the work.

The second reason is that I don’t see why art activities should be exempt of rigor. If we demand rigor from scientists, I don’t understand why we don’t have the same expectation from artists. When they are good, both

explore the limits of knowledge and try to expand them. The difference between artists and scientists may lie in the methodologies they use, but it cannot lie in the amount of expected rigor. Otherwise one would be saying that the artist is allowed to be lazy while the scientist is not. Both might be lazy, but that would be no more than a personal character trait. It is a trait that may affect the quantity of production but never should affect the quality. If laziness affects quality it stops being laziness. It becomes lack of rigor.

The formulation of problems puts us in closer proximity to the scientist in as much as it facilitates the demand for rigor. With a clearly formulated problem we can judge if the work is a good solution or if we are totally off. If the question is how much is two plus two, and we systematically get five, we are off and we know it. But it is here where the path of the scientist diverges from that of the artist. If the scientist gets five over and over, he is a candidate for suicide or for a change of profession. However, if the artist adds and gets five as a result, he has options that in other professions would be considered cheating. That is, the artist may reformulate the problem to make it fit the solution. Reformulation obviously wouldn't include a trivial gambit like making it $2.5 + 2.5$. That kind of cheating only would be done by a scientist. The reformulation by the artist could read like: "to bother everybody who knows that $2 + 2 = 4$ to the point

of creating a doubt.” The artist might then decide that the best means to achieve this goal is to develop a national advertising campaign that states $2 + 2 = 5$, without any further comment. Another reformulation could be: “To paint the faulty operation in such a sublime fashion that the viewer won’t register that there is a mathematical mistake.” Or it could lead the viewer to count the elements of the equation rather than to stick to the meaning of the first four symbols, which are **two**, **plus**, **two**, and **equal**. In that case only the last one, the **five**, would be true as both meaning and symbol.

What really matters in art is that at the end there is an indissoluble integration between problem and solution. In art it doesn’t matter which appeared first, if the question generated the answer, or if the answer generated the question. Once they are linked they cannot be separated again.

This process is not something only reserved for the artist, and it certainly is not forbidden to the scientist. It is a feedback process and both artist and scientist always listen to what the process is telling them by using immediate critical distance. The difference between both is only in that the quality control responds to different methodologies. This gives more flexibility to the artist, but not more laxity in the use of rigor.

This explanation should allay the suspicions often raised by explanations. It is said that if we explain there is no room left for creation.

That if it can be said in words there is no need to make the work of art. I totally agree that a work of art, if it really is one, cannot be exhausted with an explanation. If an art piece is no more than a translation of a program explained in words, we are in the presence of a redundant illustration and therefore a dispensable work. The work of art has to earn its right to exist. It has to be as close to inevitable, axiomatic and indispensable as possible. Curiously enough, these are also conditions we demand from science.

This leads us to another topic. It is obvious that the perfect integration of problem and solution is not enough to determine the presence of a work of art. In its own way, $2 + 2 = 4$ is an example of this perfect integration. Without my taking the liberties I took in earlier examples, it is an unobjectionable example. But it does not make it as a work of art. The reason for this is that in its banality it is a commonplace that doesn't tell us anything, and certainly is unable to shake us up. The problem lacks interest.

So, it is not just about having a clear intention or about formulating a problem with clarity to find its solution. Anybody can do that. We need more, we need a new intention, we need the formulation of an interesting problem, we need to ask a question that is really worthwhile and that generates answers that shake the universe.

A scientist friend of mine once remarked that Nobel prizes are awarded to people who ask substantial questions that are scientifically revolutionary. They are not given to those who labor to answer them. I am not completely sure about this, my friend was one who asked those questions but he never got the prize. I fear that he died believing that he was a failure. However, in art we do have that the artist does both things; he asks phenomenal questions and then becomes his own slave (or contracts slaves if he has the money) to laboriously answer them.

It is this second part we learn in art school. When I had to copy Roman busts and still-lives in my school, I was being educated to be a slave. Any school that gives primacy to technical skill over the formulation and solution of problems is an academy for slaves. It is ironic that back in the nineteenth century William Morris already said that slavery separates people from art, and here we have art schools where we learn to be slaves under the guise of learning art.

We now will have to discuss the irrational in art. The obvious question is: Is it possible to develop a methodology to produce irrational things? Partly due to my lack in psychological education, I cannot say that I have a clear answer to this. Since a methodology is composed by steps that are not necessarily logical, I dare to say that it should be possible. A

religious ritual might be one example of illogical methodology if one accepts that the intention of the methodology is to achieve a true communion with the chosen deity. But if instead the true intention of the ritual is to create a communal identity, we have something else. That same methodology then changes its character and may be considered Machiavellian. The image of a god would be used to manipulate the public so that people behave in ways unrelated to the invoked god and satisfy other, hidden interests, like electing a politician or donating money.

Art often uses random, from Rorschach-like devices to free association, to rolling dice, as means to reach irrational results. I don't believe this is the way to do it. I must confess here that I don't like the word "irrational" for these things. I am not suggesting it is a word that should be prohibited, but I don't believe it is a useful word in art. It only serves to indicate that there are more things there than those we can approach using logic. This, of course, is no big discovery. But by calling them *irrational* we excessively underscore the importance of the *rational*. Thus the world can be seen rationally or non-rationally, the latter usually with a negative connotation. However, if we are making art to expand the borderlines of knowledge, we are also expanding what we accept to be rational. Which is one way of entering irrationality. Not because we want to abandon the

rational world, but because those who limit the definition of what is rational force us to do it. Accordingly, may be we should also prohibit the word *irrational*.

In this context I am more interested in the word “unexpected,” in the sense of not having been predictable. The use of randomness helps unpredictability, but this seems a little too easy. By using randomness, the artist abandons any responsibility and submits to fate. He can say “it’s not my fault, it is destiny” and then my theories about accountability go down the drain. The introduction of randomness by Dada, Surrealism and Fluxus artists was important for historical reasons. It broke the monopoly of control the Academy attributed to the artist. It was a laudable act of contestation. But today that is over; it doesn’t contribute anything unless we find some, yes, unexpected or unpredictable twist.

Randomness does not guarantee something unexpected. After all, faced with it, one would expect anything. Randomness rather produces something unpredictable and even that is debatable, since it is predictable that anything will happen. All this sounds like wordplay, but it is important because it leads us to concepts that kill us (I mean mentally), like *originality* and *derivativeness*.

One might say that if somebody produces something unexpected that goes beyond what is known in a given moment, that would be something original and ok. Implicitly, however, *original* here also means a separation from the flock and a victory in a competition. One becomes outstanding. This reminds me that when I was in grade school in Uruguay, our grades were: outstanding, very good, good, average and deficient. With them came the baffling intermediate steps like for example “good-average” and “average-good,” or “average-deficient,” etc. These grades, like any grading system, didn’t tell us anything about ourselves; they only placed us in relation to each other. My example only is worth mentioning because of the explicitness of the language. It was explicitly about competition, not about personal achievement. There was no demand for perfection, the goal was to beat the others.

It is understandable that in the commercial world there may be the need to know how a student is placed in relation to the norm. But in art, where supposedly there are no norms, it is the word *original* that creates a big norm and distorts the creative process. I don’t want to prohibit the word because some day it may prove useful if we invest in it the meaning of originating other things. Although in that case the proper word would be *originating*, not *original*. So, we might as well prohibit *original* too.

The word *original* is identified with extreme individualism, something that in turn has nothing to do with communal culture. I recently found out that the word *idiot*, when it still was considered a Greek word, was used to designate an individual who only is interested in himself and ignores the needs of the community.

I prefer *rupture* to *original*. But I want to linger a little more on the word *original* because besides individualism there is another problem here. It is one that leads us directly to colonialism. When we talk about “original art,” originality is not defined locally but in some cultural center, and it is taken for granted that it is an absolute value. Two things happen because of this. One thing is that the center exports its originalities to be copied so that metropolitan culture can take over. In this case colonial culture is considered derivative. The other thing happens when the colony (or the dependent economy, or the periphery, or whatever word one may choose) sends out its own original contributions and they are adopted by the center. In that case the process is called recycling, multiculturalism or other words that lack the negative connotation of derivativeness. So, it is two things that serve to create a double standard and illustrate that the direction of the flow of information infuses values onto the information.

If art were an abstract and closed field like mathematics, it would be owned by everybody and the infusion of values wouldn't exist. There would be no room for local or chauvinist attributions and everybody would contribute to a common fund. However, art doesn't function this way. Being a form of communication it depends on local and communal tacit understandings that are used to solidify identities and cultural traits while expanding and enriching them. Mathematics codes ideas that try to be axiomatic and that don't allow for dialects. Art rarely tries to be really axiomatic, at least not in the mathematical sense, and even more rarely succeeds in it.

Art generally tends towards dialect. The dialect may be local, even folkloric, or hegemonic with globalist ambitions. But even when hegemonic and imperialist, it still remains a dialect and is always provincial. Imperialism is provincialism with lots of power.

The word *originality* hides all these issues and forces us to ask: "Original in regard to what?" in order to get through the ambiguities. The word *rupture* is more contextualized and, I believe, more accurate. When we expand knowledge we are breaking with a past, a tradition, a series of prejudices or conventions, and an imposition. An original work of art may lead me to admire an artist individually, but at the same time it may leave

me cold and unmoved. A work that introduces rupture affects the ways I see the world and my critical distances. Since *rupture* is a non-individualized word, a non-idiotic word, it allows me to gage much better where it happens: if locally or centrally or in the vicinity of axioms, and it doesn't matter who the author is. Which makes me ponder if the word *author* should be prohibited as well. It is awfully close to *authority*, a word I definitely would like to abolish.

If I had to find an image for culture I would say that it is like a sand mountain. Although we artists see ourselves as important original individuals, within that mountain we are no more than grains of sand: In positions of passivity and acceptance, we'll maintain the structure. In active positions we sometimes create some small slides and avalanches. Nevertheless, at the end, the sand mountain remains as the result of the position and interaction of **all** the grains.

The image should humble us. Not only because I never saw a grain of sand identified by name or signature, but also because it is difficult for one grain to change the whole mountain. And yet, that grain helps to shape the mountain. It is something important, it is all we can aspire to, but it is not such a big deal.

ⁱ Cited by Ron Susskind in *The New York Times*, 10.17.2004