

Igor Zabel

Art and Quality

1. When we talk about quality in art and the criteria for judging it, we must be aware of the fact that the criteria for labelling something as a work of art and the criteria for artistic quality are quite different. This distinction is still not self-evident since traditionally both these aspects are closely interwoven. According to this concept, for example, the more a certain work of art embodies or presents the inherent qualities that are the essence of art (for example, beauty), the closer it comes to being a perfect realization of the essence of art. Yet the field of art has expanded and fragmented within itself to such an extent over the last hundred years that it can no longer be defined by a medium (for example, painting or sculpture), a process (for example, depiction) or quality (for example, beauty). The only thing that all the diverse manifestations have in common is that they are art. The criterion of art has therefore become institutionalized, i.e. art is what presents itself or what is contextualized as art.
2. However, this does not also make it good art.
3. The breadth and diversity of the notion of art of course also means that the criteria for artistic quality cannot be simple and uniform, but are established according to the particular approach used in the work, according to its specific forms and objectives, etc. The work can be analysed and its special qualities indicated within these delineations. At this point the quality of the work shows itself through *ars interpretandi*, through the processes of interpretation that are developed through the hermeneutic circle.
4. The criteria for quality are not arbitrary, but neither are they self-evident and naturally given. Judging takes place within specific circumstances; it is performed by a concrete individual embedded in social relations, a fact the individual's judgement cannot evade. (Marx would say that a person's "social being determines their consciousness" because what is at stake here is the consciousness of a concrete individual in a concrete social situation.) Judging cannot evade this, which is why it is neither absolutely valid nor unmotivated.
5. It could perhaps be said that one of the cornerstones of quality is deviation from schematic forms, deviation from the "horizon of expectation" as reception theory would call it. However, this deviation implies a risk for both the creator and the interpreter or judge. At the same time "aesthetic distance" as a criterion of quality bears a constant danger that the quality will be overlooked due to its very nature.
6. The question of quality has yet another essential dimension. How do works that are comparable in terms of process and structure still differ from each another? What, for instance, makes the work of Donald

Judd different, even at first glance, from the work of dozens of other formally and conceptually similar artists? What is it about the sound of Coltrane's wind instrument that from the very first tone sometimes makes it clear to us that this is "something else"? In one of his essays, Slavoj Žižek raises a similar question about love. To the question "Why do you love me?" a lover may answer with a list of qualities (which are certainly not insignificant), but this is not the correct answer, this is not the response of someone who loves. The correct answer is: because the loved person embodies something more, an *unfathomable x*, which pervades their entire being and makes them beloved despite potential faults and imperfections. The analysis of the formal, content-related, contextual and other qualities of a work of art finds its rationale only in light of this *x*.

7. Therefore in a certain essential dimension, art is similar to love.

Dialogue

----- Reply -----

From: Igor Zabel

To: Urša Jurman

Subject: Re: Art and Quality

- > Dear Igor,
- > You finished the text at the point at which (given our conversations)
- > I thought it would actually "start" – the point where you were
- > developing the concept of the "unfathomable *x*" (*objet petit a*) in
- > the context of the relationship between art and its interpretation.
- > You end with a comparison between art and love, while you develop
- > no further the question of the criteria for evaluating contemporary
- > art or interpretation as a way of approaching "the beloved" and that
- > "unfathomable *x*" (*objet petit a*).

Dear Urša,

I did not really intend to address the issue of *objet a* in art because I think that this is the point where the competence of art criticism ends. The critic can say: there is "something more" in the work, but cannot elucidate "what" that "more" is. Just a few brief answers to your comments: criteria can be developed through interpretation, within the hermeneutic process, whereas *objet a* is a surplus value that is essential but cannot be included in the process of interpretation/evaluation; rather

this process takes place in its light, so to speak (or glistens through it). However, even though the critic's process is illuminated by this *a*, it is something that transcends the critic's interpretive practice. Let's take Žižek's lover as an example: the critic determines the attributes of the person, enumerates them and shows how they relate to each other, but what that "more" is that he sees (or misses) in the person he cannot say.

- > Žižek writes: "(The object/loved one) is loved for something that
- > is more in him than himself." (In: Slavoj Žižek, "Od dvorske igre do
- > Igre solz" [From Courtly Love to The Crying Game], *Eseji*, no. 1-2,
- > 1993, p. 219.)

Here: it is more than a list of the person's (good and bad) attributes.

- > There is an asymmetry between what the "lover" sees in
- > the loved one and what the loved one knows him- or herself
- > to be. Lacan writes: "I love you, but, because inexplicably I love in
- > you something more than you – the *objet petit a*, I mutilate you"
- > (*The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Four Fundamental Concepts*
- > *of Psychoanalysis*, Book XI, Norton and Co., London and New York,
- > 1998, p. 263). At the same time, the *objet petit a* is something that
- > is not absorbed by the Other completely; it is an object that
- > symbolization (in this case interpretation) can not fully encompass,
- > yet it is at the same time the basis for symbolization.

Of course, within the practice of interpretation this means precisely the difference that we "see" (or "hear" in music) but which cannot be shown through *ars interpretandi*; this is what I had in mind when I spoke of two structurally and formally similar works, one of which we recognize as that *something else*.

- > Furthermore, I think that the concept of desire (and, on the other
- > hand, also enjoyment) is vital in dealing with *objet a*, as well as
- > the significance of the detour (is this theory in our context???)
- > in approaching the loved object; "the space of desire is bent;
- > the only way to reach the Object is through a detour – proceeding
- > straight on ensures that we miss it." (Žižek, *ibid.*)

The subject of desire and enjoyment in the effect of art is a complex issue and the question arises as to how it pertains to the domain of art criticism and how much this could already be seen as a "meta" area; by this I mean the questions that determine the position and practice of the critic and therefore necessarily evade his (self)reflection. Without a specific libidinal economy there is no art, no enjoyment in it, perhaps no quality either. Yet criticism can not think about this, just as it cannot consider the physiological structure of the optic nerve either, which so significantly

determines visual art and the viewer's relationship to it. These are questions that go beyond the field of the critic's scrutiny and evaluation of the work; they are beyond him ("meta"), even if they relate to the very foundations of his subject and activity.

If you take Freud's analysis of the joke as an example: he analyses the effect of the joke through the enjoyment that it inspires and talks about the different levels of this enjoyment. One is based on the formal level (and this level is precisely analysed by Freud), yet enjoyment that is stimulated in such a way is generally only *Vorlust* (forepleasure) which, very simply put, is the pleasure stimulated by the formal qualities of the work of art and is merely the initial "bait" that allows the viewer to enjoy the much greater pleasure which comes from activating suppressed and censored tendencies (of sexuality and aggression etc.). Art criticism most likely operates at the level of this *Vorlust*. Its task is not to analyse the libidinal economy implied by the work or by art as a whole.

Igor

----- Reply -----

From: Urša Jurman
To: Igor Zabel
Subject: Re: Art and Quality

Hi Igor,

Nevertheless, I feel that it would be good to conclude with criticism, with *ars interpretandi* – with the idea that approaching this *x* or *objeta* is for the critic, in fact, a "constitutive illusion".

Best, Urša

----- Reply -----

From: Igor Zabel
To: Urša Jurman
Subject: Re: Art and Quality

Dear Urša,

OK, I'll try to add to that a bit. Firstly, I should perhaps say a few quick words about the relationship between interpretation and evaluation. These, of course, are not the same even though both approaches are closely interwoven and often difficult to separate. I think that evaluation

is closely linked to the analysis and interpretation of the work, which, however, is not just a matter of “what the artist wanted to say” but primarily a demonstration of the relationship between the elements of form and content as well as the contextual placing of the work. (As Schleiermacher said: “To understand the work as well as and then better than its author.”) Let’s suppose that the task of criticism, if it is understood as the art or skill of judgement and evaluation, is to identify, clarify and thus objectify the qualities, the values, of a certain work. I think that here the critic’s approach may be roughly twofold. He may either immediately recognize the work as brilliant (or mediocre or poor) and resort to interpretive processes in order to confirm, substantiate or verify this primary, immediate feeling, or, alternatively, he may start with a more or less indifferent attitude, with the qualities of the work coming to the fore through the processes of analysis and interpretation. In both cases, there is an exchange between the processes of interpretation and judgement, as well as the impossibility of objectifying a certain vital dimension of quality (the famous x) (this is the point where critics begin to speak in metaphorical language, regardless of how objective and scientific their process may be). This does not invalidate interpretation; it is still about an (analytical and synthetic, immanent and contextual) understanding of the work that is more profound and more intensive than the usual reception of art. (I do not agree with Susan Sontag’s claim that we need an “erotics” of art instead of hermeneutics; hermeneutics is, in fact, itself essentially an “erotics”, which is why we traditionally speak of *ars interpretandi*, in other words, both the skill and art of interpretation.) I agree with you that the x is that something “more” in the work, a fundamental purpose and drive of the interpreter’s and critic’s endeavour, but it is nevertheless elusive and unutterable. But the paradox also lies in the fact that interpretation does not actually reach it, but shows it, so to speak, by way of a detour – it’s like the well-known story of the buried pot of gold, which its seekers never found (since it didn’t exist), but they did produce it since, in their search for it, they did a good job tilling the field.

And perhaps also this: I wrote previously that art is similar to love in a certain essential dimension. By this I do not only mean the evaluation of works but the creation of art and being involved with it. You can name a whole list of subjective and objective reasons why you might want to do this, but in the end that x still remains.

Best,
Igor

From: Urša Jurman
To: Igor Zabel
Subject: Re: Art and Quality

Hi Igor,

- > (As Schleiermacher said: “To understand the work as well as and
- > then better than its author.”) Let’s suppose that the task of criticism,
- > if it is understood as the art or skill of judgement and evaluation,
- > is to identify, clarify and thus objectify the qualities, the values,
- > of a certain work.

A kind of superiority is evident in these words; as if the “fullness”, the “sufficiency” of the “mute” object depends on the critic’s interpretation, in which the criteria and evaluation are still predominantly legitimized by veiling, by suppressing, the critic/interpreter’s personal, institutional, ideological, commercial, etc., “investments”, which the critic, in service to “objectivity”, to “correctness”, applies or projects onto the artwork or the artist and his or her intentions.

At the moment I am reading the book *Performing the Body, Performing the Text* (Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson, eds., Routledge, London and New York, 1999). In the introduction the editors write about how the criterion of Kant’s unmotivated pleasure remains essential for the evaluation of contemporary art, for which we are still using – although labelled *postmodern* – the presuppositions of modernist criticism, which go back to the Enlightenment, even in cases where the notion of aesthetic value has been replaced by the avant-garde concept of political value or efficiency. In opposition to political and aesthetic judgements, which in both cases ensure “solid” meaning and value, the authors put forward the anxious uncertainty of the performative aspect of meaning-making. The notion of the performative indicates an openness of interpretation which is thus understood more as a process than as an act with an ultimate goal. Moreover, the concept of the performative recognizes the ways in which desire and enjoyment play a role in the complex network of relations between artists, sponsors, critics, spectators, etc. In the context of the performative, the artwork is no longer seen as a static object with a single meaning, which is unproblematically or, so to speak, “naturally” conveyed from the artist to the viewer/connoisseur/critic; the act of interpretation is understood as a kind of performance, and interpretation as something partial, fragile, precarious – which also represents a critique of art criticism and art history as traditionally practiced. Since meaning is produced between and across subjects and through language, it can never be fully secured, but is rather understood as “a negotiated domain” (also

important here is who has access to the “position of making meaning”), as changeable and determined by/contingent on social and personal investments and contexts.

I am keen to know your thoughts on this synopsis in connection with the above quote from your previous email.

Best, Urša

Epilogue

----- Reply -----

From: Igor Zabel

To: Urša Jurman

Subject: Re: Art and Quality

Dear Urša,

I think that we should not forget that the initial problem here is the question of quality in art and its criteria (of course, it is difficult to separate the issue of evaluation from the issue of interpretation; however, we are dealing with two fields, which is why I am trying to restrain myself here and not deviate too much from the topic at hand – quality in art). We always make judgements and evaluations when we are faced with art, but criticism does this consciously and systematically, and tries to explain its criteria of judgement. Criticism attempts to evaluate the work or oeuvre and (sometimes more, sometimes less explicitly) tell us criteria on which its judgment rests. This is what I was thinking of when I said that criticism objectifies the qualities of the work. It is actually irrelevant here whether the criteria for quality are firmly and “objectively” defined, as for instance in the tradition of academism, or if they are based on the critic’s extremely subjective and elusive “sensibility” or even the “party allegiance” (or “political acceptability” as we might say today) of the artwork. The main thing is that the critic is aware of the principles and criteria of their own criticism.

Of course, it’s a separate question how the criteria themselves are justified. In the brief text that became the starting point to our correspondence, I mentioned that the person making the judgment is always a concrete individual in a concrete social, historical and cultural situation. This situation informs their viewpoint and directs their judgment.

Here I am faced with two questions. Firstly, what does it mean for the critic to be aware that they are making judgements as an individual defined by class, race, culture and gender? And that these and similar circumstances shape their view, which is linked to their individual interests and the interests of the social systems to which they are bound? One of the possibilities is certainly an attempt to reflect on the very process of evaluation (e.g. how specific interests are established and consolidated in a certain society through the “generally accepted” canons of value). But if this is so, is it still possible for the critic to make judgements? If every judgement is such a socio-historical phenomenon, then it is nevertheless better to give up the naive act of evaluation in favour of a reflective analysis of the process of evaluation itself, its role and function. Let me present a similar possibility using a somewhat exaggerated illustration. If the idea of the autonomous value of art and the objective and autonomous activity of the critic is an illusion, and if, conversely, the actual state of affairs is such that selection and evaluation, under the guise of general validity and autonomy, validate a thinking and an evaluation that are in the service of a single (dominant) class and help to preserve the position of that class, and if there are no objective criteria for quality but instead the canon of quality is based in the interests of the ruling class, then the real discussion is not aesthetic but political. This means, however, that good art is art that benefits the struggle of the working class and its most enlightened part, the Communist Party.

The second question that springs to mind is: If there are no generally valid, and immanent values in the work, then what is the point of criticism? If, however, I agree that evaluation is not strictly subjective, but that criticism can help me to better understand and appreciate the work, am I not already caught in the trap of ideology (i.e. have I not been duped by the systems of power and accepted their rules of the game)?

Here let me try to indicate a few theses and hypotheses, and use them to respond to least some of your comments:

1. The basic fact is that art exists and that we perceive it as something meaningful and important, as something that is worth dealing with even without some particular reason – in other words, because of that *x*.
2. The experience of art is necessarily differentiated; we consider one piece of art better and another worse.

3. I think that criticism as evaluation is possible, and not just as a theory of evaluation. If a relationship with art is possible, then criticism as a systematization of evaluation and an attempt to formulate and explain the criteria of evaluation is also possible.
4. Historicism, the Marxist critique of ideology, psychoanalysis and other major conceptual shifts in the last century or two define the framework of our thinking. We know that when we examine, analyse, interpret, and judge works of art, we also need to take into account their specific, implicit context. We know that our understanding of this context may be “wrong” because of the specificity of our position, but also that this “wrong” understanding may be exactly the one most appropriate as the expression of our views.
5. Art (and criticism) are capable, in various forms, of transcending their specific circumstances. In this way, art is able to deeply transform itself, yet at the same time it creates a connected tradition, which ultimately determines also the position from which we evaluate it. Our position, in other words, is already based on a certain tradition, but the innovations of new works and the traditions we accept are constantly changing that position. While it is clear that we here become an organ of selection and exclusion, these mechanisms cannot be explained by criticism alone.
6. The close relationship between criticism and interpretation is based on this relativism. The criteria can not be developed in advance and applied to all artworks equally, but need to be established or at least modified each time anew, from a mutual relationship with the work of art.
7. Both art and criticism are intersubjective. Although I rarely accept in full the theses of a particular critique, it often helps me when I’m trying to comprehend and appreciate art. In this respect the critique of an artwork or art practice exists in a broader sense in a demonstrative relation (to use Baxandall’s term). In this way, criticism can, like art, transcend its own historical and cultural circumstances and thus at the same time become the object of interpretation and judgement.
8. We could perhaps say that judgment takes place as a dialogical process in specific circumstances. A dialogical situation can occur because the work is embedded in intersubjective relations and because it is able to transcend its specific original circumstances. The interpreter and the critic (coming from a particular viewpoint, which is also determined by certain personal and social interests) address the artwork, which brings to this relationship the essential dimension

of foreignness and inaccessibility, and which (as it appears today) interpretation and assessment can never fully explain and evaluate; consequently this is a never-ending process.

9. The critic and the interpreter may be aware of their particularity. They may try to integrate this into their strategy towards the work. But one thing is an illusion: the idea that the point from which we see and speak can be made transparent and that we can unconditionally comprehend the social role of our own activity – particularly in the light of the historical development of society. (I often think of the critical intellectuals of the 1960s, whose theory and practice were based on a critique of ideology and who were convinced that through their reflections they were making explicit hidden class relations and thus elucidating a social reality into which they could then consciously situate themselves and their activity; on the contrary, their actual socio-historical role was profoundly different – they may have helped in the transformation of one system of domination into another, namely in shaping the sort of society that was required by an evolving global capitalism and its explosive consumer society.)

Igor

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IGOR ZABEL
ASSOCIATION
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