

FROM ART CRITICISM TO CONTEMPORARY CRITICAL PRACTICES IN ECUADOR

By Trinidad Pérez
Ecuador

XLVI. AICA International Congress
Slovakia, 24-27 September, 2013

September 25th, 2013

In the last two decades art criticism in Ecuador has undergone significant changes. It has not only become a practice more linked to cultural and social critical theory but the places from which and the channels through which it is practiced have modified radically. They are unconventional and unusual. The agents who practice it are also diverse. We can now speak of an expanded field of art criticism that is practiced from many places, perspectives, actors, and that refers to many forms of art. Though the field itself has not become significantly larger it does have become more dynamic. In this paper I would like to propose that art criticism in Ecuador, as in other parts of the world, can be better understood as a critical practice that functions on a dialogical and horizontal relationship to the object, the artist and/or the public. In addition, it is no longer possible to separate clearly the spaces of action of the artist, the critic or the curator.

This discussion should shed light into the role of art criticism in small artistic communities, distant from the dominant cultural centers. It should also indicate some elements about the local developments in relation to global tendencies and the tensions generated by it. One could ask about the role of art criticism in postcolonial societies whose identity has been defined in dialogue and tension with what is dictated from those centers. We know that art criticism was born with modernity and that it has been central to the definition of the modern art system. Thus we can ask ourselves if it is at all relevant when the values of such system are being questioned. Or else, we can think in which way art criticism has taken new forms in accord to the changes at the interior of the system.

In this presentation I will talk about the changes that art criticism has experimented in Ecuador in the last decades in the context of a reconfiguration of the local art scene.

Sites and agents in the history of art criticism in Ecuador

One important moment in the emergence of a modern art scene in Ecuador was the creation in 1904 of the National School of Fine Arts. Among the many activities that it promoted was the first art magazine in the country, in which teachers and students published their artistic work and commented about world and Ecuadorian art. Though from 1905 to 1908 it was published regularly, for the next fifty years, the magazine came out only sporadically. In 1918 a group of artists created the magazine *Caricatura*, whose focus on this medium indicate its critical intentions. In 1926 appeared the first independent avant-garde visual art magazine, *Revista Hélice*, that only edited six issues. These specialized art magazines, as well as newspapers and literary magazines, were the sites where art criticism was practiced at the beginning of the past century. The critics in the art magazines were artists and writers. In the newspapers, they were mostly journalists who adventured themselves to write about the new art that was circulating.

During the thirties more politically radical art movements generated a number of actions among which were magazines and books that reviewed the contributions of modern art in Ecuador and proposed new directions for the art production of the time. The writers-critics were journalists and writers who worked together to conform a new politically radical avant-garde. These independent initiatives contributed to the creation of a dynamic art scene between about 1935 and 1944. This last date signaled the foundation of one of the most important official cultural institutions of the Twentieth Century in Ecuador: la Casa de la Cultura Ecuatoriana (The House of Ecuadorian Culture), which at least during its first two decades of activity, led the intellectual and critical life of the country. From its inception it captured those independent art activities of the thirties: magazines, saloons and critics. *Letras del Ecuador* was the magazine in which intellectuals and literary and critics defined the opinion about contemporary art at the time. While during the fifties and sixties other literary magazines were promoted by the institution, no magazine exclusively dedicated to the visual arts was supported.

Sites and agents in the history of art criticism in Ecuador during the seventies to the nineties

Since the 1970's until the late nineties, art criticism in Ecuador has been more visible and dynamic. It situated itself mainly in newspapers, but also in general interest magazines. The seventies is an important decade in the economic history of Ecuador. It was marked by a huge expansion of oil exploitation and export trade and, thus, approximately between 1972 until about 1982, Ecuador lived an important economic boom. This boom had important effects on the art scene. During this decade the government created and supported the creation of national museums and institutions for the protection of the cultural heritage. A great number of galleries bloomed and, with them, an unprecedented art market. Perhaps due to the same economic conditions, basic and higher education expanded, and thus art education and the professionalization of artists. While during the seventies there were one or two active critics writing in the pages of newspapers and their academic background was still linked to literature or journalism, by the late eighties and during the nineties, a greater number of critics began to participate in the field and their academic background was more closely linked to the visual arts, mainly to art history.

For some observers of this period, its negative legacy was the configuration of an art scene mostly based on market values.¹ While many galleries opened, most focused exclusively on commercial art products. Yet, although perhaps very few, some galleries that accepted experimental and alternative proposals did open up. The museums' acquisition practices tended to follow the market tendencies, instead of developing reflexive and critical curatorial politics. In this context art criticism moved in between the promotion of new artists that could be accepted by the public and potential buyers and the support to new, emerging art practices. It functioned divided by the will to create a public that accepted art and the need to move into more radical critical practices. The first type of art criticism was the most common. Very few ventured into the second.

The positive side of this scenario was that, in spite of the commercial predominance of the time, this was a time when the public sphere of art expanded, as never before. Among those that moved around this art scene were middle and higher social sectors as well as intellectuals and artists. Not only did these actors developed an informal public sphere, but demanded more formal forms of criticism. Though artists close to what the public could, certainly, be easily accepted and quickly

¹ See, for example María Fernanda Cartagena: La Galería Madeleine Hollaender. 25 años apostando por el arte contemporáneo en el Ecuador, entre muchas otras cosas. Texto en el Catálogo conmemorativo de la Galería Madeleine Hollaender. Guayaquil, 2002: 9-19.

absorbed by the art market, during the seventies and eighties, artists whose proposals were more experimental were also given attention by critics and institutions. Thus, it was a time when, as never before, critical artists did receive some public recognition and their work was acquired by new collectors.

This scenario ended at the end of the nineties when the country experienced a profound political and economic crisis. Already as early as the mid eighties and throughout the nineties a series of governments advanced a neoliberal state project that favored the shrinkage of the state apparatus. This affected, in the first place, the educational and cultural systems. Those museums that had flourished during the mid seventies, by the late eighties and during the nineties, saw an increasing reduction of their capacity of action. Once the economic crisis came to a critical point, by the end of the nineties, most art galleries that had been functioning in the main cities of the country, closed. Yet, although the economic factors were determinant, an additional element was the exhaustion of the value system of the local art scene. It was the result of an internal institutional crisis.

Disputes over the character of the art scene during the nineties and the 2000's

The artistic scene that developed during the seventies and eighties reached its highest point when in 1987 the International Painting Biennale of Cuenca was created. However by the mid nineties, a doubt had been casted over the preeminence of painting in contemporary art in the local art scene and a big debate about it had been launched. This dispute, that really had to do with the character of the contemporary art field, was intensified at the end of the nineties and early 2000's. The relation of art to the market came into question and its involvement in social and political issues was demanded. The role of art galleries and state institutions was also challenged.

In the midst of this debate, what role played art criticism? During the late eighties and first half of the nineties, the field was signaled by the entrance of a group of professionals trained in the visual arts, mostly art historians. They contributed with a more reflexive and contextual analysis than before. They continued to write mostly in newspapers and cultural magazines. But with the art galleries at their climax, the critics also wrote for their small exhibition catalogues. The fact that this spaces were either linked to the corporative press or to the art galleries certainly limited the possibility of the deployment of a more polemical art criticism. Probably because of that and with the distance that time allows, we can see today that the debate about painting in contemporary art and the reconfiguration of the art field eluded these traditional places of art criticism. Thus, art criticism practiced in such a way was also challenged.

Art criticism today

Since the financial crisis and the reconfiguration of the art system at the end of the nineties and at the beginning of the 2000's, art criticism has moved to new sites. To begin with, the professional profile of those who practice it has become more closely linked to the visual arts or to some sort of critical theory and if related to journalism it is with a more specialized formal education on cultural journalism of sorts. Some people who previously contributed to magazines or newspapers have opened independent blogs. The publication of catalogues has expanded and the critical contributions have become more reflexive and contextual. As we have seen, very few magazines exclusively dedicated to the visual arts were published in Ecuador during the past century. Yet, during the last decade, for the first time, a magazine hired an art critic as part of its permanent staff.

From the nineties on, art in Ecuador has moved from the predominance of the values of modernity to the consolidation, by the 2000's, of a contemporary art scene. As a result, production, curatorship and analysis have functioned outside the official spaces through collective and collaborative action with and from the community.² Art criticism has been moving away from its judgmental role to become instead a practice of companionship and dialogue. Cartagena, one of our prominent art critics, has observed that what is important today "is not the promotion of contemporary art in itself but instead to position our practices within the ample field of possibilities, being conscious of the political, ethical and epistemological consequences of our work. We should identify the public to which we are addressing and we should recognize the advantages of working from the margins of the global art system".³

While the contemporary art scene in Ecuador is operating in this independent fashion, the present government has introduced a new cultural institutionalization which, without a doubt, is going to have effects on the development of the contemporary art scene. A new ministry of culture is setting up guidelines for the promotion of cultural practices and it is creating a University of the arts. In this context, Cartagena is of the opinion that "independent social actors still lead the processes and make up a powerful sphere of negotiation. They still have the capacity to transform, translate, imply and modify contemporary meanings, practices and artifacts."⁴

Final words

Though art criticism has been a marginal practice in Ecuador, the shift towards a configuration of a contemporary art scene in the last decades has allowed it to operate closer to the diversity of artistic productions outside the official spheres. The crisis forced art criticism to place itself as a practice critical of the status quo. It led it to become an accomplice of art production that follows it, that accompanies and supports it, replacing the hierarchical traditional role that it had. This has meant also that the sites where it is practiced from have become more open and versatile.

In the context of the emergence of an art that is independent and that works in relation to particular contexts and situations, critical practices must have the same critical and independent character. In small art communities as the Ecuadorian art scene, the role of art criticism is relevant in as much it is a critical reflection that accompanies an artistic creation associated to social and political processes.

² María Fernanda Cartagena has denominated the 1990s a hinge decade, a decade of transition: María Fernanda Cartagena, "De la emergencia del arte contemporáneo a la incidencia de los actores en red", en *Arte Actual* 2011, Quito, FLACSO, 2012: 12.

³ Cartagena, 2012: 12.

⁴ Cartagena, 2012: 12.