

Manuel Gnam is a writer and artist based in Berlin. He is the former cofounder of the art journal *Art Against Art* and his writing has featured in *e-flux*, *Kaleidoscope* and *Afterall*. He has exhibited internationally including the Whitney Biennial in New York, gta Exhibitions in Zurich, and Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts, Boston. He is currently interested in what remains of art after automation.

*Jill Johnston: The Disintegration of A Critic. A Walk-through*  
Megan Francis Sullivan

In 2019, the book and exhibition *Jill Johnston: The Disintegration of A Critic* was a collaborative effort between artist Megan Francis Sullivan, art historian and writer Fiona McGovern, and curator Axel Wieder. The publication features a selection of texts that were originally published in Jill Johnston's weekly column in the New York free newspaper *The Village Voice* from 1960 to 1974, a format in which Johnston, through her writing, could dissolve distinctions between the personal, the critical, and the political. What started out as a 'Dance' column soon shifted to anecdotes and observations about matrixes of the art world and her personal life, using, as art critic David Bourdon stated, a "cliff hanger" approach. For the exhibition at Bergen Kunsthall, the publication served as a backdrop to bring together divergent artworks and cultural artifacts featured in and around Johnston's columns, from documents of Modern dance, Judson Dance Theater, happenings and other activities in downtown NYC, to artifacts out of Women's liberation movement, including her depiction as an unruly lesbian activist within mainstream media. The critic—in the case of Johnston—is self-implicated in the congealings and unravelings of a sinuous cultural and social milieu. This presentation will offer a walk-through of the Bergen Kunsthall show and discuss some nuts and bolts considerations that came up in the curating and editing process.

Megan Francis Sullivan is an artist living and working in Berlin. Her work has been featured in institutions, project spaces, and galleries like Kunsthalle Basel, Neuer Essener Kunstverein, Nousmoules (Vienna), Objectif Exhibitions (Antwerp), Kunsthalle Bern or Mathew Gallery (Berlin), as well as in books and zines, for example *Paradis* (Claude Balls Int.), *likenesses* (Villa Atrata, with Nick Mauss and Kristian Vistrup Madsen, forthcoming), or *The Bathers (Inverted)* (Kunsthalle Bern). She is publisher of *S\*J\*G*, a periodical for singular essays, and teaches at Kunsthochschule Mainz.

**A selection of printed materials related to the conference will be on view at**

**Tiny Mutual Admiration Societies**

**in the department of Painting  
Oskar-Kokoschka-Platz 2, room 626**

**from June 1–July 2, 2023.**

# THE PRACTICE OF CRITICISM

**June 1–June 2, 2023**

**Conference**

**Concept and organization:  
Helmut Draxler and Hannes Loichinger**

**A cooperation of the department of Art Theory and the department of Painting**

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**Conference**

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**Program**

**Thursday, June 1, 2023**

**2:00 pm Introduction**  
by Helmut Draxler and Hannes Loichinger

**2:30 pm Lecture**  
by Alex Kitnick

**3:30 pm Break**

**4:00 pm Panel 1**  
*The Art of Criticism* with  
Jay Chung, Tanja Widmann, Ken Okiishi  
Moderation: Amanda Holmes

**6:00 pm Break**

**6:30 pm Lecture**  
by Judith Barry

**Friday, June 2, 2023**

**11:00 am Panel 2**  
*The Criticism of Art* with  
Catherine Chevalier, Kristian Vistrup Madsen, Jakob Schillinger  
Moderation: Antonia Birnbaum

**1:00 pm Break**

**2:00 pm Lecture**  
by Valérie Knoll

**3:00 pm Panel 3**  
*The Media of Criticism* with  
Anke Dyes, Taslima Ahmed / Manuel Gnam, Megan Francis Sullivan  
Moderation: Christian Egger

**Presentations and discussions will be held in English.**

How do art and criticism actually relate to each other? Whereas the classical understanding of *art criticism* still envisaged a separate sphere of art that was to be evaluated and criticized, the boundaries between the spheres of art and criticism seem to be largely blurring today. In particular, art has become just as critical as criticism, and criticism has strayed from its referentiality to art, resulting in a situation where criticism revolves more and more around itself, while aligning itself with art precisely in this respect. One can welcome or lament this situation of structural "indistinguishability," but one can also make it the starting point of a specific reflection in which their difference is preserved and the ways in which they are related can be addressed. From this perspective, it is not the merging of the realms of art and criticism, but the exchange between them that can be grasped as the actual productive moment of contemporary art.

The problem of this exchange, however, is that it can no longer be related to a common horizon of a canonical safeguarding of values, in the sense of a functioning "art world" or "bourgeois public sphere." The lack of systemic integration of the various institutional, discursive, media, or market conditions, invoked by every articulation of art and criticism, is constitutive for the symbolic space of contemporary art. Perhaps the high degree of autonomization of the individual spheres of value—and thus the impossibility of a common canon—even forms the actual ground for the longing for the fusion of the categories of art and criticism. This impulse of the imaginary, which scatters differences, can only be countered by a focus on the exchange relations in which the *practice of criticism*—as criticism *and* as art—is crucial. Such a practice of criticism presupposes both reflection on its own specific conditions and an understanding of the particular interplay between value claim and value contestation: art and criticism undermine each other, whereby criticism requires an art that can only be critical to a certain extent, but which nevertheless presupposes and selectively suspends criticism. Moreover, beyond any empirical assertion of practical criticism and critical practice as art or as criticism, it points to the necessity of conceptualizing one's own horizon of significance.

Accordingly, the conference asks on the one hand art critics about their own decisive art experience, which led them to work as art critics, and on the other hand artists about their understanding of the practice of criticism in general that underlies the impulse for their own (art) critical activity. Within this field of reference situated between different media, the practice of criticism is to become recognizable not so much as a universally applicable and always already legitimate method, but rather as a historically specific attitude or positioning in which the contingency of one's own conditionality is accepted and transformed into the social-symbolic space of contemporary art. Here, the lack of a given canonical meaning corresponds to the importance of an engaged practice of judgment, in which one's own indeterminacy can appear as a condition for the possibility of a symbolic opening onto a beyond of art and criticism. (HD/HL)

**The Practice of Criticism**

**University of Applied Arts Vienna  
Oskar-Kokoschka-Platz 2  
1010 Vienna**

**Ferstel-Wing**

**June 1, 2023, 2–8 pm, Seminar room 07  
(OKPF, 1. OG)  
June 2, 2023, 11 am–5 pm, Lecture hall 1  
(OKPF, EG)**

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Tiny Mutual Admiration Societies (Oskar-Kokoschka-Platz 2, room 626) in  
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## Thursday, June 1, 2023

### 2:00 pm Introduction

Helmut Draxler and Hannes Loichinger

### 2:30 pm Lecture

#### *Talking criticism*

Alex Kitnick

My talk will focus on the work of poet and critic David Antin in the context of the crisis of criticism in the 1960s and 70s. While most criticism typically addresses itself to a vague entity known as “the public,” and this was especially true during the moment of modernism, Antin invented a type of criticism that acknowledged the shifting audiences for art. He sought to make a kind of embodied criticism, generated live in front of an audience, that would account for and engage those present, but which would also carry the quality of live voice over into print. This is most evident in Antin’s 1972 text, “Talking at Pomona,” published in the September 1972 issue of *Artforum*. Needless to say, talking, voices, and vernaculars are central here, and my talk will do its best to account for the possible meanings of talking: anti-specialization; de-definition; discourse; and dialogue. My talk will conclude with some guesses about the possible implications of Antin’s method today.

Alex Kitnick teaches art history and criticism at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, and is a frequent contributor to publications including *4Columns*, *Artforum*, and *October*. His book *Distant Early Warning: Marshall McLuhan and the Transformation of the Avant-Garde* was published by University of Chicago Press in 2021.

### 3:30 pm Break

### 4:00 pm Panel 1

#### *The Art of Criticism*

with Jay Chung, Tanja Widmann, Ken Okiishi; Moderation: Amanda Holmes

#### *Mind Over Matter?*

Jay Chung

At the intersection of concrete poetry, the Cageian event score, and Dada lies conceptual art. Rejecting traditional artistic mediums, it is concerned with the nature of language and information as artistic material. But aside from the creative, it is likely that conceptual art was also influenced by the work of cryptographer and information scientist Claude Shannon, the “father of information theory.” In the 1950s Shannon introduced a formal method for quantifying information, paving the way for now commonplace notions such as JPEG compression, end-to-end encryption, and the large language model. Shannon and the conceptual artist share a marked indifference toward the semantic content of writing. The former sees the redundancy of language as its most salient feature. In other words, he is concerned with the fact that, given a part of a phrase, it is possible to predict what will come next with some accuracy. The latter typically employs literary tropes such as the list, quotation, repetition, permutation, blank instruction, translation, or transcription to achieve a disinterested affect. For the conceptual artist, these tropes structure language, lending it the properties of a malleable, physical substance. After a brief consideration of a few of Shannon’s discoveries, this presentation will consist of an overview of the conceptual writing strategies employed in the work of Jay Chung and Q Takeki Maeda.

Jay Chung is one half of the collaborative group Jay Chung and Q Takeki Maeda. The artists’ work has been described as addressing “the post-conceptual condition,” that is to say, “[not] the name for a particular type of art, so much as the historical-ontological condition for the production of contemporary art in general.” In recent solo exhibitions, Chung and Maeda have focused on how socially constructed, “quasi-institutional” narratives, both real and imagined, are employed in the production, consumption and distribution of art. These include: *The Auratic Narrative*, Cologne Kunstverein, *New Images*, House of Gaga, and *Dull and Bathos*, Galerie Francesca Pia. Exhibitions of their work have also been presented at Essex Street, New York, statements, Tokyo, 356 Mission, Los Angeles, and in group shows at galleries and museums. Chung is a contributing editor at *May Revue*, a Paris based journal for art criticism. (he/him)

#### *Ah, critique!*

Tanja Widmann

There is no hope for critique in art. There is no hope for art in critique. Since the 1980s at the latest, an impossibility has been proclaimed, a loss lamented, a steady decline attested. In an endless loop of critical self-reflection, an eclipse has taken place. Critique was discarded—only to be resurrected at the same time. A steady productivity in the form of melancholy and negation; a cycle of return and repetition. Ah, critique! But what is supposedly lost in these melancholic narratives—a critique based on a sovereign

perspective, an outside, a secured distance—, has this not always been questionable? Guided by an ideal that necessarily remains unattainable and yet must always be envisioned anew? If critique persists then, it is due to a breakdown of orientation, on a slipping and sliding ground, in a crisis of reference in which the figure tends to lose itself. Or rather: If critique insists in art and art insists in critique, then precisely as mimicry.

Tanja Widmann is an artist and writer. She teaches at the Academy of Fine Arts Munich. Her work has been show at FELIX GAUDLITZ (Vienna), New Toni (Berlin), Kunsthalle Wien (Vienna), nousmoules (Vienna/Berlin), Secession (Vienna), Badischer Kunstverein (Karlsruhe), Grazer Kunstverein (Graz), a.o. Books: *Postapocalyptic Self-Reflection* (with Laura Preston), Vienna 2019; *Post-Apocalyptic Realism* (with Laura Preston and Tonio Kröner) Cologne 2018; *Ein kritischer Modus. Die Form der Theorie und der Inhalt der Kunst* (with Helmut Draxler) Vienna 2013; *To Make Oneself Similar in This Sense. Clever & Smart Nr. 39* (artists book), Vienna 2012.

#### *Against Better Judgement: Problems in the Artist as Critic*

Ken Okiishi

In this talk Okiishi will narrate and self-critically interrogate the fraught relationships between entangled practices of making and exhibiting critical artworks, writing art criticism and essays of cultural criticism published in art publications, and existing as a social actor in highly volatile cultural milieus. The complex social relations formed (and de-formed) by the potential for urban experience to be chaotic, arbitrary, as well as serendipitous, and the power of social media to both enlarge access and optimize identities, as its processes became simultaneously questioned, repudiated, embodied, normalized, and celebrated, will be examined as a shifting ground in which the initial strangeness of the polyphonic critical artist became, in the last decade, a streamlined strategy of cultural production and self-promotion. Okiishi will attempt to recover the original impetus, critical messiness and charm of inhabiting, and sharing, multiple positions with little to no organizing principle.

Ken Okiishi. BFA, The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, New York, 2001. Recent exhibitions include: MoMA Presents: Ken Okiishi’s *Vital Behaviors*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York (2021); *A Model Childhood*, The University of Hawai’i at Mānoa; Pilar Corrias, London; Reena Spaulings Fine Art, Los Angeles (2018–2022); Manifesta 13, Marseille (2020); *Being and/or Time*, Reena Spaulings, New York (2017); *Porous Feedback*, Arbeiterkammer Wien (2015); *Screen Presence*, Museum Ludwig, Cologne (2014); Whitney Biennial 2014. Okiishi’s writing has appeared in *Artforum*, *Texte zur Kunst*, *May*, *Bidoun*, *Triple Canopy*, *The Brooklyn Rail* and a book on his work, *The Very Quick of the Word*, was published by Sternberg Press in 2014. He has taught at Columbia University, Harvard University, Bard College and Cooper Union.

### 6:00 pm Break

### 6:30 pm Lecture

#### *Casual Confrontations*

Judith Barry

Research-based art practices seem to be suddenly of interest in art world discourse as a number of recent articles and books attest.<sup>1</sup> However, many artists, myself included, have been making use of research methodologies in their artistic practices for decades, while arguably research as a form of knowledge production has underpinned art-making and crafts for centuries. So how does research function in creative practices? While it isn’t exactly the case *that research is seeing what everybody else has seen and thinking what nobody else has thought...* as is often claimed<sup>2</sup>; nonetheless this sensibility has been a guiding principle of my strategy since I was a student. Also true for me is that *research is often what I’m doing when I don’t know what I am doing...* Research takes me somewhere that I would not have been able to go if I had not been doing the research—which I find generative. But after the research, then the question becomes: what’s next? In other words: what can be done with research/information as a type of ‘raw material’? In my practice as an artist, it is often critical writing in relation to an evolving set of research questions that activates my art-making process. As an artist whose go to ‘form’ is installation, and as someone who understands the form of installation as a way to potentially produce engaging, collaborative space(s) where multiple points of view can be expressed/developed/explored, I actively attempt to create conditions that produce these types of forms within space. Hence I don’t have a signature style and both the form and content of my work evolve in this manner. I will briefly discuss a few of my projects in different media to illustrate my approach.

Judith Barry, an artist and writer, has exhibited internationally at such venues as the Berlin Biennale, Venice Biennale(s) of Art/Architecture, Sao Paolo Biennial, Whitney Biennial, and documenta, among many others. A twelve-installation survey of her work, *Judith Barry: body without limits*, toured in Spain and Portugal between 2008 and 2010. Current exhibitions include *Style Congo. Heritage & Heresy*, CIVA, Brussels and *Topologies of the Real, Techne Shenzhen 2023*, Shenzhen Museum of Contemporary Art and Urban Planning. *Public Fantasy*, a collection of Barry’s essays, was published by the ICA in London, 1991.

<sup>1</sup> Claire Bishop’s “Information Overload” in *Artforum* April 2023, and books by James Voorhies, *Postsensual Aesthetics* (2023), Tom Holert, *Knowledge Beside Itself*(2020), and Kevin Lotery, *The Long Front of Culture* (2020).  
<sup>2</sup> Attributed to Albert Szent-Györgyi (1893–1986), Hungarian pharmacologist known for his discovery of Vitamin C. Awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine in 1937.

## Friday, June 2, 2023

### 11:00 am Panel 2

#### *The Criticism of Art*

with Catherine Chevalier, Kristian Vistrup Madsen, Jakob Schillinger;

Moderation: Antonia Birnbaum

#### *Forms of Articulation of Art Criticism and Art Practices, and Beyond*

Catherine Chevalier

In the legacies of conceptual artists of the 1960s like Lee Lozano, Dan Graham, and especially Marcel Broodthaers, more artists in the 1990s became interested in articulating “discursive” practices (including forms of art criticism) and artworks. Broodthaers, as we know, went even further by asserting the paradoxical predominance of language over objects—through a process of reification. In recent years, with the global shift of artistic content towards the digital media sphere, the boundaries between artworks and their representation, between art and criticism appear more and more confused. At the same time, it becomes now also common sense to consider the discursive dimension of an artwork as its index—as a referential system within which it can be situated. Could we avoid the term “discursive” as an explanatory function? And instead focus on the subjective and open ways to articulate the distinctions (and indistinctions) between art practices and art criticism? Maybe another term can be introduced to speak of these forms of subjective articulations, perhaps in reference to editing, which means also writing in a broader way. I would like to reflect about these questions through the work of artists, editors and writers, Sylvère Lotringer & Chris Kraus, Alejandra Riera, Josef Strau, Hélène Fauquet or Proust.

Catherine Chevalier is an art critic. In 2009, she founded the art journal *May* with Eva Svennung, of which she is currently the editor-in-chief. Her writings have been published in art magazines and exhibition catalogues on, amongst others, Heimo Zobernig, Michael Krebber, Wade Guyton, Jana Euler, and Bea Schlingelhoff. With Andreas Fohr, she co-edited a French anthology of *Texte zur Kunst* (1990–1998) published by Les presses du réel in 2010. She has taught in various art schools in France and abroad, notably at HEAD in Geneva in the work.master and was invited as visiting researcher at Columbia University in New York (2017/2019). She currently organizes seminars at the Cité internationale des arts in Paris as part of a partnership with *May*, which has an office there.

#### *Discernment and Distinction: Current challenges in the practice of art criticism*

Kristian Vistrup Madsen

The 2010s saw a turn towards activism and politics in art and culture, which charged the critic with the job of ascertaining, not the quality of the work, but the radicality of its politics, and of whether its maker might be in some way ‘problematic’, or accused of appropriation. The waning importance of the art object in itself—with last year’s documenta as both pinnacle and collapse—has, in the last couple of years, naturally led to a renewed acceptance of beauty, decoration and illustration, which is linked to political discourse only tenuously as a form of advertisement: queer abstraction, black figuration, a painting of nature as ‘critical of the anthropocene’. Meanwhile, market pressure and developments in online culture exacerbated by the pandemic have meant that old gate-keeping mechanisms are faltering. With nothing to replace them, art criticism becomes urgently more important, asking critics to develop more primary responses to art that do not rely on discourse or morality, but require an expert way of simply seeing. But, after so many years of deconstructive, paranoid readings, how do we critically distinguish between one beautiful painting and the next? And, what’s more, how do we find a shared language for it?

Kristian Vistrup Madsen is a writer and art critic based in Berlin. His work has been published in magazines such as *Artforum*, *Harpers*, and *The White Review*. *Doing time: essays on using people* was published by floating opera press in 2021.

#### *Prost Critical*

Jakob Schillinger

Is a given artistic practice really critical? Does economic success or sponsorship by a fashion brand compromise the work’s criticality? Has institutional critique been academized and recuperated? Which critical strategies are still viable today? Has critique run out of critical esteem? Questions such as these define the discourse of contemporary art. Instead of seeking yet another set of answers, my presentation will examine these questions themselves and inquire into their systemic function. The hypothesis is that criticality functions as the art system’s highest value: that the distinction critical/not critical constitutes the guiding difference on which all other distinctions between—and meanings of—individual artworks or artistic positions depend. Drawing on recent case studies, I argue that the distinction critical/not critical provides the code that ensures that artworks, exhibitions, reviews, essays, etc. connect to further artworks, exhibitions, reviews, and essays and thereby reproduce the art system as such.

Jakob Schillinger is Professor of Cultural Theory at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste Nuremberg. His research focuses on the media-technological and social conditions of art and visual culture and on their connection to gender.

### 1:00 pm Break

### 2:00 pm Lecture

#### *Criticism is banned from my house*

Valérie Knoll

Already the sound displeases me. The noise on the palate, the formed sound without image. My relationship to criticism is difficult, as with many terms that are all too often placed in rooms, but in the meantime it has become unclear what they are supposed to fill at all. I react to pseudo-art criticism with repulsion. Anyone who has ever written an exhibition review already calls themselves an art critic on their résumé. There is too much bumbling around, mostly with the thin aim of getting one’s own name into circulation. I did away with the press tour at the Kunsthalle Bern. In the end, I was nevertheless grateful for the “in-house critic” there, who wrote about every exhibition for seven years. It is complicated, because art only comes into the world when it is spoken and written about, but this rarely happens appropriately. I also have a hard time with art that criticizes the conditions which surprisingly often foot the bill. It finds little place in my program. This lecture will explain why criticism is banned from my house, even though it would be welcome.

Valérie Knoll is a curator and was born in Basel in 1978. For the past seven years, Knoll has programmed the Kunsthalle Bern. As of July 1, 2023, she will take over the reins of the Kölnischer Kunstverein. Before Bern, she directed the Halle für Kunst in Lüneburg in tandem. Previously, she wrote about exhibitions for a Swiss newspaper and *Artforum International*. In this role, she did not see herself as an art critic. In May 2023, Sternberg Press will publish her book, co-authored with Hans-Christian Dany, *No Dandy, No Fun. Looking Good as Things Fall Apart*.

### 3:00 pm Panel 3

#### *The Media of Criticism*

with Anke Dyes, Taslima Ahmed / Manuel Gnam, Megan Francis Sullivan;

Moderation: Christian Egger

#### *Big Data as Woman, or, The Fear of Selling Out*

Anke Dyes

Quantitative feedback—counted in likes, rankings, attendance, and sales—informs art discourse almost as much as any other area of our lives. The impact that this shift in criteria has on artistic practice and art criticism is yet unclear. At the same time, mass culture—the historical counterpart of expertise, quality, and taste—changes just as fundamentally as art production and criticism do. My presentation aims to look at some of the effects of these developments on the complementary division of both spheres, their gendered rankings, and constitutive fears. My focus lies on the role art criticism will play, when singular choices and effects as well as groupings into virtual neighborhoods of shared interests only further the same algorithmic outcome: to fit people into ever more specific categories, each new specificity better at predicting future interests and distinctions.

Anke Dyes is an artist and a writer. She regularly writes catalog essays, reviews, and press releases for artist friends and less frequently for people she doesn’t know personally. She worked as an editor for magazines such as *Texte zur Kunst* and *The Critical Ass*. Her recent publications include the artist book *A Substantive Theory of Harm*, 2019 and the magazine *Future Laus against Fat Shaming*, 2021.

#### *Critical update required: your current version of art critique no longer runs on this operating system*

Taslima Ahmed, Manuel Gnam

If you want art criticism to continue today then you have to write better than Chat GPT (which contains all of the books you’ve read) and you have to resist the expedient pressures of the market (which includes commodity logic driven gallerists and ‘sensitive’ artists) who want you to purely write promotional texts that support their property as well as the government funded projects that are trying to thinly prop up social policy and ideological cohesion with no regard for artistic merit. All of these trajectories make you look bad and are replaceable by machines or other people. The reason why many art critics still rely on e.g. Greenberg (which they can no longer do covertly because the algorithm knows) is because he thought through his arguments and developed them to a sophisticated level that could convince a wider audience of the worth of his set of artists’ innovation. If we no longer want a corroded culture lodged in balkanisation and relativism, then we have to look deeper at the foundational underpinnings, the personal stakes and consequences involved in making artistic choices. We need public conflicts of opinion based on reasons (as opposed to culture wars) so that real artistic value can be appreciated.

Taslima Ahmed is an artist and writer living in Berlin. She was the cofounder of the art journal *Art Against Art* (2015–2020) and is currently showing new paintings at the Westfälischer Kunstverein in Münster. The forthcoming publication Reader: *Productive Image Interference. Sigmar Polke and Current Perspectives* describes her views on the particularity of artist consciousness.