

## What is Critique in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

Discussing *Terra Critica*: a conversation between Birgit Mara Kaiser, Kathrin Thiele and Mercedes Bunz

*Terra Critica* is an international research network in the humanities, which discusses the task of critical theory and critique under the conditions of the 21st century and its globally entangled world. Initiated by Birgit Mara Kaiser and Kathrin Thiele in 2012, it consists of a group of core members and a wider circle of participants. After the first workshop was held at Utrecht University, Mercedes Bunz, one of the members of *Terra Critica*, discusses with the initiators of the network the outcome of the workshop and why we need to look at critique now.

Mercedes Bunz: The two of you initiated this urgent and important project with a workshop in December 2012 called “Terra Critica: Re-visioning the Critical Task of the Humanities in a Globalized World”. What was the trigger to start this debate?

Birgit Kaiser: We came to this out of a sense of deep dissatisfaction with the pressure currently put on the humanities, largely stemming, it seems, from a globalized – and I would translate globalized pejoratively here as neo-liberalist – market-ruled world. We need to respond to this, but at the same time also re-position ourselves, in a world that is increasingly ‘entangled’. How do we respond to this pressure or the market-logic, and what is the humanities’ task in view of a complexified world? Our immediate aim was to say, critique is one specific response that the humanities give, a specific manner of operating that the humanities have to offer. Personally, our focus on critique also has to do with both of our educational backgrounds, coming out of US American departments of comparative literature and critical theory. Critique is at the moment not as visible anymore in academic debates as it was in the late 1990s and early 2000s, but it feels to us like a very important contribution.

Kathrin Thiele: When we said ‘re-visioning the critical task’, it was also to devote ourselves again to the work of what critique means. Criticality and critique are certainly still buzzwords in public discourse, but more and more so in a sense that we

feel doesn't do justice anymore to the richness of what critique actually is. And thus, it was really taking up also a notion or thematic complex that somehow is wedged between 'everybody knows what it is' and 'nobody knows anymore what it is'. If we contextualize ourselves and the critical practice within and of the humanities *today*, how to make critique productive in this context? We really wanted to both address the problematic aspects of the traditional notion of critique, which cannot be ignored, and at the same time to really push for continual work on it.

MB: Can you specify a bit more what you mean by the problematic aspects of a traditional notion of critique? I think it is a really important aspect, and one needs to understand this in order to get what *Terra Critica* is about.

KT: I think it is very important to realize that a certain notion of criticizing and critique has actually contributed to aspects of the global precariousness or to the global situation that we are in. A certain mode of dividing things into two sides, or trying to judge things too clearly from a certain standpoint. If we claim such a 'critical' stance as the only true emancipatory position, we are ultimately reproducing a very Eurocentric worldview. A re-thinking and re-affirming of critique has to take this problematic aspect into account and work it through.

MB: What I really like about the project: for you this doesn't mean to leave critique behind.

BK: Exactly. We want to continue practicing critique in order to engage with our world, despite these traditions. But how do we bring critique into a more productive scenario than the negativity and the character of judgment that seems to cling to it? That's the question, or it's an open task, an open call, and *Terra Critica* is a form of devoting ourselves to this question. Our point is not to say: we know what critique is, or what the critical task has to be, and what is needed. We are much more saying: let's investigate.

MB: Thus, we are facing a complicated and interesting situation: As we find ourselves in a new scenario, we need to look at the humanities being pressured by the market; but we also need to think about the new situation which the traditional critique of the humanities finds itself in. In a globalized world, critique needs to be held on to and re-thought, and not taken out of the equation or left behind.

KT: Yes, and I think the two components of *Terra Critica*, its two terms are really saying that in a certain way. One of the terms is stressing the focus on *Terra*, the planetary but earthly condition of life(s) and knowledge(s); the other is stressing the focus on *Critica*, a question of *attitude* of engaging with that condition.

### **The Heritage of Critique**

MB: One aspect specifically caught my eye: *Terra Critica* does not stage itself as something new, nor does it negate anything. I mean, normally projects like this announce: 'this hasn't been done yet', or: 'we do something completely new'. On the webpage of *Terra Critica*, it simply says: the critical task must be adjusted and our practices and images of critique need to be rethought. Can we talk a bit about your reason for putting it this way?

KT: One of the aspects that made criticality and critique a currently rather ineffective mode of discussion, reflection and thinking, is that criticality has been for too long now understood as oppositional and thus as silencing 'the other side', devaluing another point of view. It seems to me that this brought critique in a rather vulnerable or 'critical' condition. Here I agree with Bruno Latour who says that we need to attend to this situation if critique should *not* run out of steam. This is the problem: nothing gets produced if we just put the other side down in a critical encounter. However, it is the production of something more, the emergence of something else that all knowledge production, all meaning, all truth production is eventually after.

MB: Instead of stressing what is to be negated, or operating oppositionally, affirmative critique puts the focus on the emergence of something else.

KT: Well, isn't it true that any scientific experiment that only proves the old wrong would not produce anything new yet? Knowledge or science wouldn't move if the focus were only on defying something instead of exploring and investigating anew. To find 'the new', there has to always exactly be something more, a surplus, another dimension that most of the time hasn't been anticipated at all; and yet, such a 'new' doesn't detach itself completely from what was: you have to keep things, retain things, in order to produce something new.

MB: But there is a certain direction in which you would look.

KT: I am strongly convinced that the way *how* we phrase a question, *how* we approach a topic is most important. This isn't easy. To come back to critique: it's not about a completely new form of critique that we are looking for, but about making *adjustments*. However, these adjustments we find ultimately quite fundamental. For example, the adjustment that critique no longer separates things out into two sides or that it does no longer produce a critical subject versus a criticized object, these points and adjustments have been made, they are there as bits and pieces, in different writings and texts. You can pull them together by drawing on many authors, but you cannot really say that we have already re-phrased critique on the basis of these points. It is not yet recognizable as what is called critical knowledge or criticality. Thus, there is something, a conceptual shift, which has not yet been made. But it needs to be made. And it needs to be made also by a method that does not betray the complexity of the issue at stake.

MB: The old is an essential part to build the new, but it needs to be built in a way in which the old becomes something quite different.

BK: We cannot simply discard the old to move on, or away. So, one of our tasks is to affirm the history of critique as it is coming out of the Enlightenment. Also with good reason: while the Enlightenment has very rightfully been criticized for its many blind spots, at the same time I think we are trying to maintain its important notions of

emancipation and democracy. For this, we need to do two things at the same time: affirm that critique needs to be re-adjusted in order to respond to a merely Eurocentric tradition of critique, but with this also re-affirm the critical gesture, the attitude of a desired transformation – let's call it emancipation.

MB: Maybe we should clarify what precisely is meant by emancipation.

BK: Critique in this Enlightenment form is linked to Kant's demand to 'dare to know' and to use your own understanding. He wrote this in his text 'What is Enlightenment' of 1784, at a time he was also writing the three critiques – these writings are linked. And it is this general idea that inspired the emancipatory, democratic and revolutionary movements of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century in Europe and in the Americas. In that capacity of a claim to self-determination and freedom based on the use of one's own understanding, the critical attitude travelled quickly, for example inspiring Toussaint l'Ouverture and the Haitian revolution. Critique as such an Enlightenment gesture was not merely a European affair. We don't want to give up on the gist of critique as an intervention into the state of affairs, an intervention that hopes to move things into directions that we agree upon as more desirable, again: let's call it emancipation. And I think right there we have the task at hand for today: to find out what 'we' would agree upon, who 'we' might be and how differentiated a 'we' is, and – in the course of that – find out which direction, at that moment, and for that locale, might be more desirable. So, ultimately we could say the task implies also to break through the very contemporary belief that there is no alternative to the system.

KT: These two things just mentioned are very important. To depart from what is given is normally what we expect when we hear critique. You know, normally we say: "this is what we need now, we have to change what was before and have to do this and that". But we rather want to suggest that if we want to see change emerging from critique and critical inquiries, we also need to have different models of how we approach questions of old and new, of what has been and what sh/could be. And saying this, I, of course, also realize that I cannot avoid producing another departure in that process – yet, one important aspect is to keep this paradox of critique in mind.

MB: And what is your position towards the heritage of the enlightenment?

KT: That is the other thing that also seems very important to me. As Birgit just said, while emancipation in an Enlightenment sense is mainly seen as a Western tradition, it had always already a broader reach and attraction. The struggles of decolonization, for example, were making appeals to a similar gesture, critique and liberation. It is thus a tradition whose heritage we cannot *not* want (to say it with Spivak), but which we can also not *not* criticize in its Eurocentric reception. You cannot *not* be critical about it, given its histories and blind spots; still it is attractive in its emancipatory potential. We need a revisioning of critique in this critical manner that brings this heritage into our own present.

BK: Maybe it helps to think this with Foucault: with Foucault we can fully affirm the fact that power is productive, while at the same time fully affirm the fact that this doesn't mean that we cannot bend the circumstances in ways that we find more productive. Ultimately, this is not a new concept of critique, but is what critique always meant if it wasn't used in an oppositional modus, and dividing into different camps. A critique affirms what has become and the desire for a slight degree of freedom. So, in the end, we don't need something more here, but we need to see critique again, in its most rich dimensions. This is what we call 'adjusting': neither fancy to have 'overcome' the old, but work it through – nor banish a tradition as culturally limited (Western, thus 'bad'), but again, work it through to revise it.

### **Affirmation, Care, Crisis**

MB: Now that Foucault has come into play, I'm curious how you would describe the situation we discussed so far. When poststructuralism positioned itself against modernity, it happened to be quite a debate. Today, there is another discursive shift we live through, but this one seems to be gliding. It happens, or operates in a rather quiet mode, silently. Is what we're doing an intervention, or do we simply re-orient

ourselves anew, or is the re-orientation an intervention? – I know this question implies already a lot.

KT: It is important to remember that we link this whole topic very openly to a *Terra Critica*, that is a world in crisis. This is not to say: hey, let's make a virtue out of a necessity. But situations of crisis are more open to adjustments and critical reformulations. Right now, on all levels, economically, ecologically, socially, culturally, biologically, politically – which are all *political* dimensions for us – we notice diverse critical scenarios. Living hurts quite a bit and we all – wherever we are – notice it by now. But moments of crisis have also the potential of being a productive moment, if we take it in a Foucauldian manner. Foucault's times – or poststructuralism's – were also emerging out of a grand moment of crisis. I would say this could be a similar productive moment, which we should also really grab.

MB: In this sense, it would be a re-orientation that is simultaneously an intervention. But maybe we should hold on for a moment. Something Birgit said a moment ago, makes me think. I am not sure if you noticed, but you picked up the neoliberals' favorite declaration: that "there is no alternative to the system". And suddenly everything in me just went: "No, I don't accept this! There is an alternative." However, by thinking this, I find myself saying "No", while actually I don't want to think against.

BK: When I mentioned the neoliberal rhetoric of 'no alternative' it was exactly to say that it is this: neoliberal rhetoric. One crucial critical task for today seems to be to exactly debunk the belief that there is no alternative to 'the system' – the neoliberal rhetoric that precisely silences critique as an 'opener' for other possibilities. And, on a second level, we also want to emphasize that there is truly no alternative when it comes to this (one) world that we're inhabiting: in these times, and in a globalized world, we learn slowly that this world, this *terra critica*, is really all we have. Kathrin has worked quite a bit on this, in relation to immanence, which was also one of the themes of our first workshop. But that is something totally different from the neoliberal dogma of 'no alternative'.

KT: Yes, actually beneath and despite this rhetoric of ‘no alternative’ to a neoliberal system, to me it’s important to state that there is no alternative to *this* world, because *this is the world that is* (which of course doesn’t say anything about what this world is, and here lies the crux: that ultimately ‘change is all there is’ and, thus, a belief in alternatives is inherent here, change is the ever most constant thing). I really feel this is something we are about to learn, and we don’t learn it just by thinking about alternatives, but by seeing these desires for different futures actually emerge.

MB: This adds to critique a specific gesture. But compared to the critical gestures driven by a negative force, it isn’t a gesture of correction. It is one of care; and this makes a big difference.

KT: Indeed, I believe that this modus of ‘critique and care’ needs to be emphasized again right at this moment. It opens a way out of the quite established tradition of critique as a very combating and positioning gesture. However, I wouldn’t say that ‘care’ substitutes the other more traditional, positioning modus completely. There is a certain balance to be kept. Both are needed. But what became of positioning is only a mode of: one is right, the other is wrong; or better and worse; or good and bad; or good and evil. And then we end up in a dead end street. We need to open up these modi again.

MB: And adding care to critique is one possibility to do so.

KT: We should exactly *care* more for the details, *care* more for the matters at stake. Matters really do matter – and in two ways: these matters are not only something that matter, but they are also something that very much matters to those who are touched by them, to the ones affirming these ‘matters of care’ (this is a term Maria Puig della Bellacasa has coined and it seems very useful to our contexts, something that also Melanie Seghal draws on in her position paper).



## On the Politics of Critique

MB: Can we connect the question of care with the gesture of affirmation, and look into this further? Kathrin, you and I, we have both written about the concept of affirmation and Birgit has approached it more indirectly, with the help of Heinrich von Kleist's play "Das Käthchen von Heilbronn", reading Käthchen's interestingly strange and stubborn behavior as a sort of semi-agency in the position paper for the first workshop. If we stay with affirmation for a second, let me ask you: Isn't it interesting to see that the concept of affirmation is suddenly so plainly in the room as something promising or something that allows a different attitude. I wonder – from a philosophical perspective, with an eye on the history of philosophy – why that is. And how this came to be. Of course, we find the concept of affirmation discussed by several philosophers, among them Nietzsche, and Deleuze, and even Badiou, although maybe in quite a different manner. But it seems to me that this concept has entered our debates at a specific moment in time, or let me rather say: because of the time we live in. We don't choose it, because we have read a couple of philosophers we like and now would strive to continue their projects. Rather, the issues of care and affirmation have some kind of urgency about them. They intrude.

KT: OK, that is really the question of affirmation. I fully agree with you. It's not something that I see purely in line with a tradition of philosophy which privileges affirmation over negation, but I really believe that affirmation in our sense is much more related to a productive *caring* for this world, for how we engage with our surroundings. Of course, it has also helped me a lot in my work on a specific mode of thinking, and in that sense a certain tradition of thought/philosophy does matter to me. But that it is cropping up in debates around critique, I think, has to do with affirmation permitting to articulate other modi of political engagements – and indeed, they do seem to intrude (again) with force.

MB: For you, political engagement and in that sense the notion of a micro-level play a very important part in thinking affirmation.

KT: Yes, my perspective of affirmation starts from what is to be called a micro-level. A straight forward (macro-)politics of 'affirmation', I'm not sure if I see that as very likely in our current times...But micro- and macro- aren't separate realms anyway. Rather, they are different dimensions of the Spinozian formula 'we do not yet know what our bodies can do'. So, if I now speak of affirmation, I think it from the Foucauldian or Deleuze-Guattarian micropolitics, that however ultimately affect all (macro-)levels. I see the micro-politics heritage of affirmation also very much in the feminist line of thinking: How do you subvert something effectively, which is precisely not the same as simply overcoming one master-narrative by another? And thus it is a political attitude always already – affirmation; and quite a successful one I would say. For me, affirmation is productive if it is meant in this way: not to simply love everything, but rather to really turn around both sides (love and hate), to avert the immediate (perhaps) natural tendency that you want to reject something if you do not agree or dislike it, and instead, to try it the other way around – to exercise a non-negation until space – a different *spacing* – will open up. And that space, I think, gives space for producing a change. I discussed this also in my position paper for the first workshop.

### **Semi-Agency and the Ambiguity of Affirmation**

BK: And in that sense, perhaps, Käthchen can be read, if we see her semi-agency as affirmation. Speaking of love, Deleuze himself called Käthchen 'sweet little Käthchen', the contrary force to Kleist's Penthesilea, this storm of passion and fury. So, sweet little Käthchen simply falls in love with the count and affirms this completely. She does not negate anything nor does she state any intention, but she follows the count around, trails him, in that sense affirms everything he does. Thereby, persistently, she molds slowly but surely the situation and their relation into a direction that in the end seems to be desired by all – the count who realizes that he loves her, her father who is happy that honor is restored and Käthchen – as it seems all she wanted was to be with the count, although she never says she wants or intended anything. That transformative process is a micro-political process.

KT: Which we have to depersonalize.

BK: We have to depersonalize it, of course, but it's a micro-political process.

KT: Yes, it's a micro-process, as something that is in a sense not so visible, if you will. It's quite invisible how things get molded in this situation.

BK: Invisible – if we stay with Käthchen for a moment – in the sense that she seems to have no 'agency': she is the down-trodden, the kicked about, a figure of dog-like obedience. She clearly is no model of agency, but she's also not without agency. So in that sense, I called it semi-agency.

MB: I find this concept very interesting and wonder how it resonates with the concept of a subject. I can also see that out there it will be interpreted on each side of its hyphen i.e. in two contradictory ways: one which takes semi-agency up as a different model of agency as we do in *Terra Critica*, and one which simply feels deprived by the 'semi'. To me, the former model of (semi-)agency seems to be very typical for today's discourse: it isn't operating in a classic dialectical sense: first for, then against. Instead, it operates rather ambiguously, and for and against open up or happen simultaneously. Which also means: if you want to stick with the concept of affirmation as critique, you have to 'stay with the trouble', as Donna Haraway says. Maybe we can briefly look at this trouble? One challenge which haunts the concept of affirmation as critique currently is the fact that it operates within a discourse which has generally started to embrace affirmative gestures. For example, ever since Facebook and Twitter have become countries we live in, we like, recommend, or favour. Another thing is that today, negative critique is simply confirmed or affirmed for strategic reasons – my first position paper discussed this in greater detail by looking at the reaction of the media mogul Rupert Murdoch to the phone hacking scandal of his UK newspapers. Being negatively criticized, he affirmed this critique saying: Yes, what we did was really horrible. However, his aim was clearly to continue as before, and a year later, Murdoch called campaigners against phone hacking 'scumbag celebrities'. The Murdoch example shows in my opinion that one

needs to understand that affirmation isn't critical in itself. There is affirmation *without difference*, and there is affirmation *which makes a difference*. Which I find interesting. Its positioning is very different to the concept of opposition, which claimed – rightly or not – to be critical per se. Still, affirmation *can* make a difference, and 'care' or 'concern' is what seems to make this happen. Of course, this care or concern is also a different concern (*Sorge*) from Heidegger's, and even from the concern (*souci*) of Foucault, which transforms a negative moment into a positive.

KT: Yes. I'm not even sure if I'd say that I could relate the first version you just presented to affirmation seriously...So, I want to emphasize that affirmative critique for me comes from the feminist tradition, which I always understood as a tradition (in the plural) that acknowledges the implicatedness of positioning and 'cares' from within. Caring for something is an ongoing process, precisely a never-ending trajectory. You know that you are totally implicated within the matters. You're never completely at the end of it.

BK: But care, understood in this way, is also always coupled with mutual transformation. It is not someone taking care of someone else, that can easily be a smothering care, but it's always a relational and transformative process. In that sense, I also think the ambiguity you mentioned in view of Murdoch, Mercedes, is not as difficult to disentangle: affirmation is not confession (with however much truth or lies in it). I would not call the admission of guilt, if genuine or feigned, an affirmation – and in that sense, the denial of guilt also not a negation. It is importantly, as we are discussing here, in its coupling to care and difference that affirmation becomes interesting for us and like Foucault's care of the self (*souci de soi*) a practice that is transformative in effect. In this sense, Käthchen is a figure of affirmation, she exposes herself to the (mal)treatment of the count, with the effect of transforming them both. Of producing an effect and a difference that did not reside in either one of them before the relation. Murdoch has no such interest, he seems to insist on the self-same.

KT: I agree, it really is a process where both sides are involved, the subject is not so much in charge of its caring, to an extent that one doesn't really know any more where 'one' is located – and this has immediate and very concrete implications for a re-thinking of critique. If we say critique needs a re-visioning and if we want to connect it to something like affirmation as this caring-process, how do we put that into practice when discussing critique and criticality? How can we accomplish a re-visioning of critique, connected with a terminology of affirmation, and go beyond merely giving a new filling to a concept that we then use and speak of or speak about in the exact same way as always before? How do we put that to work in the very discussion of a re-visioning?

### **Styles of Critique – The Format of the Workshop**

MB: These were the questions that were taken up in our first workshop.

KT: Yes, and for those reasons, we chose the specific format of the workshop. We shared the papers of the 25 participants beforehand, as we wanted to have everybody's papers on the table at the same time. With this, we wanted to depart from the classical conference style of paper presentations, which often leads to one-to-one responses, and even if they are generous, they ultimately operate in an oppositional modus: OK you're saying this about critique, but I am responding in that way. We wanted to move to a more *conversational modus*, in which hopefully something gets produced, something that we didn't already have in our pockets and could have presented to you as the way to go. Trying to really keep the process open, as a map to be drawn up, to produce different knowledge in a minor sense, but in a manner that is significantly intervening, making a difference, at least for the people who were there. Ultimately, such a minor sense would amount to a very large project, which can only be conducted collectively.

BK: Absolutely. Because, as you say, it is ultimately a very large project to re-formulate, or to re-think critique under conditions of subject-object entanglements (Barad), co-emergence (Ettinger), etcetera. This project must draw on a variety of

disciplinary perspectives, because there is so much to take into account. At the workshop, we were only people from the, if we may say so, 'immediate' humanities, but we would also like to invite people from the natural sciences into our discussions, and, of course, people working in the arts. Certainly, our work draws already on a variety of perspectives, but it would require a much more thorough, experimental and diverse engagement in order to also practice the entanglements that we suggest are methodologically crucial to any re-phrasing of critique today. So, this project is ultimately not even limited to humanities expertise, where we could claim the tradition of Kant through Hegel and Adorno, etcetera, to 'be' critique.

KT: The workshop was experienced by most of you as successful, not only because we had really great position papers, but also because people actually performed the affirmation we talk about. There was neither an over-politeness, nor an urge to present a full paper and stake one's very own claims. But this also means that the people who are there like the format. A certain choreography is required. The conversational setting is not endlessly open, but one needs to see how much diversity such a format can take, who from this point of view really can affirm being *at the table*. But much more is possible than academic meetings usually assume.

MB: By the way, I am going to copy this concept for one of my workshops.

KT: Wonderful, because that is exactly what we hope for and also did, and I think this is really what should be done. The point is to really *use* it.

MB: Let us discuss the three themes of the workshop. After gathering all position papers, you clustered the papers into three focal points: critique as symptomatology of the present, critical practice as immanence and affirmation, and subjects of critique. When we discussed these topics, was there something that surprised you, something that you didn't expect?

BK: The three specific session-topics were indeed distilled from the papers we received. At first, we were quite overwhelmed by how diverse they were, and we

thought: are those going to be able to speak to each other at all? But upon reading them twice, those three themes kept coming up, the symptomatology of the present, the problem of immanence or the challenge of immanence to critique, and the subject of critique, who is 'doing' critique? And, also, the second resonance in 'subjects of critique': what are the subjects of critique?

### **Subject/Object – Affect**

KT: There was something really surprising in that last cluster: We noticed that when we spoke of critique, it was very difficult to get away from a subject-object divide. Really difficult. It was a continual question in our conversations throughout the two days, and a real challenge to learn how perhaps even the approach of saying 'we have to get rid of this distinction' is going too far. The final session, dedicated to the topic 'subjects of critique', tried to find an alternative, and in this session I sensed a surprise when the alternative became suddenly linked to 'affect'. I personally wouldn't have expected this at all. I think it's connected to a certain *Zeitgeist* in theoretical debates.

MB: You mean discussing 'affect' is an effect of our *Zeitgeist*.

KT: Yes. A lot is going on in affect theory right now. I am curious about it, but also careful with that jargon. So, I was really very happy that we took the time to ask ourselves what's happening in this shift from subject-object to affect. Can affect in any way substitute the subject of critique? I really liked the way this was debated, especially since we left it at an open end, so that it is something from where to continue next time. That *this* was the open end, however, also quite surprised me. While I liked it, at the same time I thought, ah see, here is something where we have to proceed with much more precision. It might give us aspects of thinking the subject differently. But on the other hand, the question of ethics and the question of a different sort of politics when rethinking critique are something which I would have wanted us to stress more, and quite a bit more than affect. You might not want to agree with me, Birgit. Or do you?

BK: No, I don't agree, but I also don't disagree. I am also hesitant about a certain over-usage of affect. But the productive aspect of it was that we realized it to be a sort of visualization. It turned out to be a crutch to visualize what we mean when we say affirmation, or immanence. In fact, we started to talk about affect already during the second session on 'immanence and affirmation'. Jacques Lezra noticed at the end of the workshop that when we try to come up with different imagery around a different critique, in addition to the relatively abstract concepts of immanence and affirmation, we think of affect, or of critique in relation to pleasure, for example. So I agree with you that it was a surprise, and that one needs to be very precise about it – exactly to avoid the illusion that we could simply substitute or 'solve' the question of the subject by affect. But affect is also something that can take us into interesting directions.

MB: I remember also difficult and frustrating moments; during the 'subject of critique' session, we sometimes just sat there and didn't say anything. I mean, I liked these moments because no one used it to push him- or herself to the fore, but at those moments we had a hard time, and experienced moments of alienation. Personally, I see this type of alienation as a productive mode, which I think is connected to affirmation and has a lot to do with the subject and the semi-agency we talked about.

KT: Good point. I think if one manages to think alienation in an affirmative manner, we could see that alienation is not the opposite of affirmation. Alienation is a very fruitful modus of producing a difference, of making a difference or getting somewhere. This is what we learn from Nietzsche and from Deleuze's and Foucault's readings of Nietzsche, as well as from feminist readings of the philosophical tradition: affirmation is not the other to or the opposite of negation, because then it would only go as far as to not negate, i.e. continue being the 'not' of negation and exactly repeat negating. As I stressed already before in our conversation, something extra has to come to it, it is a different kind of engagement. *Terra Critica* is also after a certain methodology. Once we make that precise or more explicit, many other issues can be rethought and



should not be left aside. Alienation, for example, but also conflict or opposition can be redrawn.

MB: In that sense, *Terra Critica* remains very much related to Kant's or Benjamin's approach to critique. They use the term not in the sense of to negate, but to analyze, assess and look at something.

KT: It is an analysis and an analysis means exactly not to negate something in order to do something else, but to analyze. This is the part of critique we want to revive again.

BK: But doing so, we want to go slightly elsewhere than Kant. We want to stress the implication of the analyst within the analysis. And we want to go slightly elsewhere than Benjamin. Benjamin places critique in his reading of Jena Romanticism, for example, purely in the text or in the art-work. In his time and its contexts of criticism, this was a very radical and productive move – but we have to examine how this comes into play productively today rather than merely adhere to or copy Benjamin. The immanent criticism Benjamin spoke of is quite radically placed, but it is a self-unfolding of the artwork due to a *criticizability* inherent in the artwork – much as *translatibility* for Benjamin is inherent in the work and translation is its actualization. We would not pursue that direction, but would rather examine the semi-agency coming to or entangled with/as these unfoldings. As I said, Benjamin foregoes such entanglement, does not place any emphasis on it, since it was important for him to stress the immanent criticizability of the work of art itself.

KT: We could say that while Kant placed critique very much on the subject's side, immanent critique places it very much on the object's side – which is something currently very alive also in contemporary theoretical approaches. Think, for example, of speculative realism at the moment. Speaking of semi-agencies is something slightly different. We could also speak of a quantum mode, in which you do not know anymore what comes before and where to start and where things are really clearly located, because – as Karen Barad has shown, drawing on Bohr – in a quantum

universe 'things' are not at their place and they're never at their place without being dis-placed either. This is exactly what we have not yet translated into our conceptual universes, and our critical practices. We still continue in a modus of thinking that is very much based on Euclidean spaces and on the understanding of atomic units from classical physics. Or, speaking in terms of art, as Birgit suggested for literary criticism: We continue to operate according to an idea that on the one side is the artwork and on the other the audience. Either you submerge to the artwork and take all clues from there, or you are the recipient or 'reader' and really put everything into the artwork. Although Roland Barthes thought his birth of the reader in much more complex ways, this is what is still largely made of it. There are always two sides.

BK: An interesting example in this context is Foucault's *Archeology of Knowledge*, a project that ventures to think history without human agency as its mover. Foucault's attempt with discourse analysis is to sketch these movements neither as a process directed by the will of a subject of history, nor as teleological and autonomous processes. While we seem to have grasped – with Freud, Nietzsche, Foucault, Barthes and others – that the autonomous subject was a fiction and we attempt to think time, discourses, shifts in discursive constellations as moving without authoritative human steering, we have fallen quite radically onto the other side. Contemporary theory is quite enthused with the object and willing to take the human out of the equation as much as possible – seen as the destructive force of the planet that needs to die for the planet to live. But I think this is overshooting the mark. Foucault has never negated or denied modulating participation of humans in discursive shifts, but we have not yet brought the two together.

KT: There are many interesting thinkers we can turn to, who have done work on the task to escape or re-negotiate the subject-object divide: The trans-subjective of Bracha Ettinger, for example, which stresses that we limit ourselves by thinking of subject-object merely as a division; or Whitehead's speculative pragmatism, or Gilbert Simondon's individuation, or – as I said earlier – the explorations of quantum entanglements that Karen Barad thinks through...

## The Situation of the Humanities

MB: So there is work to be done on all three of the themes the workshop discussed, not only the subject-object relation, but also immanence, affirmation and critique as a symptomatology of the present. I have one last thematic block that I would like to talk about: the actual situation of the humanities. There is currently a strong tendency or a wish for the humanities to be more useful. They are asked to be of service to our societies, or blamed to be useless. Now, it is very easy to sympathize with the fear for their instrumentalization. But it isn't easy to find an answer to this demand for usefulness. To me this is an interesting problem: What is really wrong with making sense for our societies, or why should the humanities have a problem with that? How would you describe the current situation of the humanities, and what role does *Terra Critica* as well as critique play here?

BK: This is a huge question. I don't think we can respond to it adequately here, but I completely agree with you that there is no problem with the wish to be useful for societies, or to life outside the university. It is not and never has been the purpose of the humanities to be sitting in an ivory tower. But the question is how we define usefulness. I think that is the issue. In a sense we hope *Terra Critica* intervenes into this by saying yes, the work done here is useful, but useful does not mean applicable knowledge that you can cash in on. Useful rather means pointing out social, political, economic, ecological tensions, thinking through the conditions of certain social constellations, highlighting where inequalities are established and how they find expression, that is: useful is not to offer or prescribe alternatives, but to deliver a profound analysis, a symptomatology of the present. That is all we do – leaving the prescriptions and implementations of 'remedies' to policy makers, because we are not policy makers! So, I think in this sense of analysis we love the humanities to be useful, you know, in that sense it's one of their crucial dimensions.

KT: And the notion of critique is currently indeed challenged by the link between usefulness and simplification, a link that is very present in the contemporary climate. This desire for simplicity has a lot to do with the belief that when we reduce things to

the simplest elements, we can explain things better. The humanities, however, have had a long tradition in addressing the complexity of the world, not its simplicity. Even modern sciences developed actually out of a complex engagement with a diverse multi-faceted world, driven by curiosity, not strictly along lines of causality. These engagements have to be taken seriously as explaining something, as giving you meaning. Telling *some* truths was much more accepted already in the high times of poststructuralism than it seems to me to be the case now, the more post-secular or post-postmodern our times become. To me critique produces very useful knowledges, it is just not very simple knowledge, but knowledge engaged in the complexities of things. In the high times of valuing applicability this isn't a method so easy to take on.

MB: As a last effort, could you sum up what *Terra Critica* contributes to such a symptomatology of the present?

BK: The idea of *Terra Critica* starts from the conviction that our concepts of analysis and the frameworks in which we think and the tools we use in order to analyze have to be adequate to what we are facing. Thus, the tool of critique has to be reformulated and made fitting to contemporary conditions. And the fundamental condition that we take as the basis from which we start is a globalized world – globalized in a positive sense now as a planet that is entangled and relational, and therefore in constant becoming, where there is no outside point or position into which you could withdraw, step back from and say: OK, from this perspective I judge the world. Instead, critique is always *of* the world, it is always situated and expressed from within worldly engagements – and as such also always itself an expression of the world. And we think this specificity of 'being *of* the world' has to be emphasized again in critical analyses in order to be effective.

MB: So there is work to be done...to be continued.



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