

Martta Heikkilä, PhD

From Aesthetics to Ethics? The Contemporary Tasks of Criticism

In the conference presentation, I shall deal with a fundamental question within the practice and theory of art criticism: namely, is there a possibility to make a difference between the criteria used in the evaluation of art and of social reality? In the light of aesthetic theories, how shall a critic approach works of art that cannot be appreciated by aesthetic and artistic criteria only, but that require the critic to take a stand on reality in a wider sense? How has the critic's position changed in front of this inevitable situation, which does not allow an escape to "aestheticism" for any critic?

In theories of art of the 20th century, many thinkers have expressed the philosophical notion that art possesses a truth that is relevant uniquely to art. This is visible in Modernist theories of art and philosophy. For example, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger says in his *Origin of the Work of Art* (1936) that the work of art reveals one aspect of truth, and there is no reason to compare it with what we really know about the things in the world. Numerous more contemporary philosophers have developed Heidegger's idea, poststructuralist thinkers among them.

The distinction between aesthetics and ethics has thus been one of the principles of modern and postmodern art and its theories. Art and the critic have not been supposed to take a stand on the ethical questions of art, or to act morally "right", that is, to confirm any models of action. Or, at the very least, even if art can carry political and ethical messages, it still has to be granted autonomy to act independently from, for instance, political guidance.

The idea of the political and moral autonomy of art and criticism has been questioned since the 1960s and discarded on many occasions. If the critic cannot abstain from evaluating our reality when evaluating art, what is the role of criticism today? What kind of values should the critic support? If he or she is no longer supposed to be someone who gives norms to "good art", is the critic now a judge of our reality and its ethical values? In the question of the changing position of the critic, I shall shortly refer to the aftermath of the #MeToo campaign.

Biography and connection to the AICA conference themes

Martta Heikkilä is a researcher of Aesthetics at the University of Helsinki. Her areas of interest include Continental philosophy of art and art criticism. She received her PhD in 2007, and she has written reviews on art and published an introduction to art criticism (in Finnish) and numerous articles on art and its philosophy. She is preparing a study on the theory of deconstruction and the concept of the 'work of art'. She teaches at the University of Helsinki and the University of the Arts Helsinki.

In the proposal are juxtaposed are two positions that have been granted to art, autonomy and activism, and whether there a way of overcoming their divergence in the current discourse on criticism. (There is thus a link to the theme of "Interaction and conflicts between ethical and aesthetic approaches in art and art criticism".)