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Ramaya Tegegne, „Framer Framed“, 2021

Talk of equality, inclusion, and diversity has a way of having the opposite effect: by creating the impression that we are making progress toward dismantling discriminatory structures, it can distract from the pervasive double standard of addressing discrimination without implementing anti-discriminatory action. Far from defeating racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression, this mechanism threatens to reinforce them. Instead, art scholar and critic Lucie Kolb argues for other modes of critique – ones that don't displace the problem through outward displays of moral integrity known as “virtue signaling.” Discussing the artist collectives Rosa Brux and The White Pube, she demonstrates that the challenge of art criticism is not only a matter of writing; it must also address the infrastructures of publication and collaboration.

A group of Black cultural workers sits around a table discussing a letter of complaint they received as board members of an alternative, community-run cinema; they're under fire for ejecting the Black migrants who use the cinema's foyer as a daytime hangout space. That evening, the cinema will show a film on the precarity of undocumented workers. This entire scene is from Ramaya Teegne's docufiction film *Framer Framed* (2021), which highlights the double standards of a cinema management that features a decidedly anti-racist program on the one hand while pursuing discriminatory institutional policy on the other.

This highlighting of a double standard – thematic engagement with anti-racist praxis and the absence any corresponding action – is also found in two open letters from 2020 and 2021, written by the advocacy group Black Artists and Cultural Workers in Switzerland, of which Teegne is a member. Addressed to museums, art associations, galleries, and project spaces that posted black squares to their social media for #BlackoutTuesday – a global initiative aimed at expressing solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement – the letters inquired as to these institutions' planned or previous anti-racist initiatives, their programs, and their criteria for working with artists. [1] The goal was to interrogate organizational structures and management on the presence of structural racism and discrimination and to draw consequences from this – such as the implementation of a standard anti-racism clause in contracts. Even if they were first and foremost addressed to exhibition venues, the questions raised in the letters are every bit as relevant to organs of

art criticism.

In light of recent modes of dealing with critique, *Texte zur Kunst* has asked me to revisit the thoughts I set out on art-critical writing and publishing in my book *Study, Not Critique*. [2] At that time, I was interested in the fine line between self-determined critique and valorized criticality. Based on Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's thoughts on critique, my book discusses the danger of a criticism that confirms the exclusion of the selfsame marginalized voices for which it advocates. The issue at hand for Harney and Moten is the university: they describe how the authority of this institution is confirmed and validated by academics, an act that institutes mechanisms of exclusion of those knowledge practices from which the university constitutively distinguishes itself. [3] I was thus interested in forms of criticism that respond to the danger of confirming and validating their subject matter by shifting the focus to the conditions of production. The question of how we might deal with critique can be untangled and discussed only if we examine its conditions of production and governing frameworks – and if we talk about how these relate to criticism's subject matter. A perspective of this kind shifts the debate on art criticism away from substantive and methodical issues of art writing and the environments that determine and condition it, moving it instead toward technological, social, and economic infrastructures of critique, publishing, care, and possible modes of collaboration.



The concept of *handlungsnaher Kritik* – a criticism closely accompanied by action – may be helpful here. Deployed in the 1990s by editors of the German-language journal *A.N.Y.P. (Anti New York Pläne)*, it describes art criticism's perceptions of artistic engagement with the politics of AIDS, sexism, and homophobia in the United States. The *A.N.Y.P.* editors' diagnosis at that time was that these works had been discussed in the art journals of Germany, Austria, and Switzerland principally as art without being connected to local AIDS activism, thus depriving the works of their potential social impacts – essentially tantamount to depoliticizing them. In its open letter, Black Artists and Cultural Workers in Switzerland highlight a similar point – the absence of any connection between political *signaling* and a corresponding political practice. In the following, I hope to show what this

criticism-accompanied-by-action might look like in the art field, using two approaches as examples.

The Rosa Brux group from Geneva does not produce art criticism in the strictest sense; its background is curatorial, but its praxis has expanded to include cultural policy and legal advice. The group's interest was both to create awareness of structural discrimination and to respond with concrete action. Since 2018, it has run the Artists' Rights initiative: working together with activists, designers, and lawyers from the Lab-of-Arts association, the group began by launching a legal advice center at the Forde art space in Geneva, offering artists 30-minute advice sessions on art and copyright law. What interests me about Rosa Brux's criticism-accompanied-by-action approach is the way that a potential reorganization of artists' labor relations with art institutions can emerge within the framework of a curatorial practice: for this reason, Rosa Brux describes the initiative as a "self-defense course for artists." [4] The legal advice service is coupled with cultural policy work in the form of questionnaire-based reports on artists' labor conditions, put together by Rosa Brux on behalf of the City and Canton of Geneva and presented for discussion at public events. The group is currently working on an exhibition on artists' rights for this year's edition of the Swiss Art Awards run by the country's culture ministry. For the show, audio testimonials created on the basis of interviews, correspondence, and notes made by lawyers will be played back at listening stations. With this combination of legal advice, cultural policy work, and exhibition-making, Rosa Brux goes beyond collecting

stories of power mechanisms and power structures in art institutions to instead create new connections between protagonists, their testimonials, and their artistic work, thus ensuring that a space of multivocality, dissensus, and changeability can emerge within these structures.



Jeanne Gillard, Nicolas Rivet (Rosa Brux), „Untitled (Communes)“, 2015–18

The website The White Pube, based in London and Liverpool, does the work of art criticism in a more classical sense. According to their About Us page, the website’s operators, Gabrielle de la Puente and Zarina Muhammad, launched the site while they were still art students, finding the manner in which art was written about – and who was writing about it – “boringggg.” [5] De la Puente and Muhammad publish reviews and essays on art, accompanied by texts on topics such as video

games and food. The White Pube foregrounds collectivity, always connected to an interest in community. This is evident in its advocacy for a more multivocal author scene, something it supports with the White Pube Writers Grant for working-class authors, run in cooperation with the UK art platform Creative Debuts. De la Puente and Muhammad also run the White Pube Library, which collects and shares art criticism written by readers. The pair are also open about their funding, thus helping to ward off the danger of an art criticism that confirms the exclusion of the marginalized voices for whom they advocate. Their accounting is hosted openly on the website as an Excel spreadsheet, allowing readers to track all their income and expenses; they also host a library of successful funding applications, to which they upload proposals – both their own and reader-submitted – for research, events, travel, exhibitions, and productions. Here, art criticism and art-critical publishing are accompanied by the kind of tool provision typical of DIY cultures. The group also facilitates an expanded form of participation by showing how it works. This is not restricted only to their methods and references; it also includes the economic, social, and political conditions in which the project operates.



The White Pube, 2018

Practices such as these take us away from classic art-criticism formats like the article, focusing instead on exposing infrastructural relations: from group-based text and design work to questions on the technologies used in production and real-world operational structures. In thus interweaving the work of content-creation and aesthetics with technological, infrastructural, and community-organizing work, the question of the production of the public sphere reemerges. For me, what arises here is a form of art criticism that is always also at work creating

new social frameworks (which must necessarily fan out to include several domains, such as legal advice, activism, and IT). This work thus reveals the normative framework within which criticism happens while also developing alternatives – given that, after all, critical communities are created not only by symbolic alliances but also with material, communalized resources. [6] It is this kind of work – comprising various supposedly distinct spheres of labor – that serves as the basis for producing relations of equivalence between *signaling* on the one hand and engagement on the other.

Translation: Matthew James Scown

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Image credits: 1. Kunstverein Bielefeld, photo: Fred Dott; 2. minimal club; 3. photo: Rosa Brux / Hugard & Vanoverschelde; 4. The White Pube

NOTES

- [1] See Black Artists and Cultural Workers in Switzerland, “To All Art Spaces in Switzerland” (open letter), accessed January 10, 2022, <https://blackartistsinswitzerland.noblogs.org> (<https://blackartistsinswitzerland.noblogs.org>).
- [2] Lucie Kolb, *Study, Not Critique* (Vienna: Transversal, 2018).

- [3] Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Wivenhoe, UK: Minor Compositions, 2013).
- [4] Nicolas Rivet and Jeanne Gillard of Rosa Brux in conversation with the author, 2021.
- [5] "About Us," The White Pube, accessed January 8, 2022, <https://www.thewhitepube.co.uk/about> (<https://www.thewhitepube.co.uk/about>).
- [6] Precarias a la deriva, *Was ist dein Streik? Militante Streifzüge durch die Kreisläufe der Prekarität* (Vienna: Transversal, 2014), 114.

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