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Gendering the history of art criticism in France, 1750-1850

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These past few years, two very important publications, both within the history or the sociology of the fine arts, have emphasized the necessity to study art criticism not as a – possibly biased – source or as traces remaining from past and irrevocably lost artistic events, but as a historical normative discourse that has to be analyzed as such and, thus, situated in its aesthetic and social context¹. In the present text, which is based on this fundamental premise, I advocate for a further step in the renewal of the history and/or the sociology of art criticism, by mobilizing as well the analytical framework of gender, in the historicization process of this specific practice.

This text is therefore programmatic in nature². I will propose and develop, here, one perspective (among other possibilities) to follow in this gendered history/sociology of art criticism. By focusing on art critics' rhetorics of self-legitimation on the long term, I will explain how art criticism has evolved from a self-conscious activity to a prescriptive discourse during the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century ; then I will show how gender can help understand that this evolution of art criticism was actually due to a major shift in the perception of Art, which went from universally accessible through sensitivity in the 1750s, to selectively understandable one century later, thus requiring a specialized group of experts. I will also emphasize, in the process, that if there actually were *female* art critics during this period, there was however no such thing as a *feminine* art criticism.

1. Delineating a corpus of texts and authors

The first step in the historical analysis of art criticism is rather basic : what are we exactly talking about, when we talk about *art criticism*? Art criticism is a discourse on art – but, one may ask, how is it different from other discourses on art (such as the discourses of art historians, experts, philosophers, etc.) ? This question is actually not that simple to answer.

In terms of its object, can we say that art criticism deals with contemporary art/artists, whereas other discourses tend to address preferably past movements and dead artists ? No we can't, of course : contemporary art is not a monopoly of the critics, and a lot of them have actually written on the art of the past. So what about its nature : can we say that art criticism evaluates while the others describe ? In other words, is art criticism based on subjectivity, emotions and judgment values, while the other discourses on art are supposed to be neutral and informed commentaries ? Of course not, there is no such clear dichotomy in the space of the many discourses on art. Opposing art criticism to « the more neutral, descriptive work of art history represses both the inherent and continuous judgments in all

¹ For the art historian perspective, see Pierre Vaisse, « Introduction », in James Kearns et Pierre Vaisse (eds.), « *Ce Salon à quoi tout se ramène* » : *le Salon de peinture et de sculpture, 1791-1890*, Bern ; New York, Peter Lang, 2010, pp. 1-6, and for the sociological perspective, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Manet. Une révolution symbolique.*, Seuil/Raisons d'agir, Paris, 2013, pp. 312-319 et 422-426.

² This text is based on the paper delivered to the Paris *Gender and Arts Criticism* international conference (Nov. 16-17, 2015). I am grateful to Marie Buscatto, Mary Leontsini and Delphine Naudier for the opportunity they have given me to present this work-in-progress, and for their helpful suggestions and comments.

historical writing, and the philosophic arguments that description and evaluation are inevitably mixed in all writing »³.

Moreover, even if the notorious art critic Quentin Bell admits that it is absurd to imagine that a critic could be « wrong » (critics can only disagree with the future evolution of taste), he also rejects the idea that art criticism is all about the critic's sensations and partiality (or what he calls : « things that can't be verified ») as opposed to other discourses on art, which would only deal with historical or rational verifiable facts regarding artists and artworks⁴. This is not that simple, according to Bell, among other things because, on the one hand, art historians' choices are always based on more or less conscious judgments and aesthetical opinions, and because, on the other hand, art critics constantly refer to art history as a kind of « authority » (« for without some such tribunal, it is hard to see how the critic can believe that his judgments have any objective value or can be more than expressions of personal opinion »⁵). So neither the object nor the nature of art criticism can help distinguish it from other discourses on art. What about its medium, then? Isn't the press the domain for art criticism? Yes, but not only. In the past as well as today, a lot of art critics have published art catalogs, books and even manuals. Besides, in the eighteenth century, published commentaries on the fine arts were not fixed under the form of the essay that we mainly identify today with art criticism, since poems, plays, short stories and songs printed on leaflets sold in the streets, were used by the critics to publish their commentaries of the Salon in Paris. Indeed : « there has never been a complete consensus regarding the nature or the aims of art criticism, and the critics felt very differently about the purposes of art and of art criticism »⁶.

Therefore, the only safe definition of art criticism is a minimal one : *art criticism is the ensemble of texts written by art critics* – that is to say : by people who identify themselves as art critics. It seems tautological, but this definition is an actual historical position.

2. Historicizing art critics' discourses to justify their own existence

As a matter of fact, there is a precise moment in history when people writing about art started to call themselves « art critics » : art criticism actually became a *self-conscious activity* at the beginning of the eighteenth century in France and in England. A clear ensemble of historical conditions were necessary for the emergence of this specific activity – among these conditions, the first two were the existence of public exhibitions of paintings and sculptures, and the existence of a public for those events⁷. In this perspective, one way of historicizing art criticism could be to study the different rhetorical constructions which, in the course of time, critics have used to legitimate their existence. The book *Réflexions critiques sur la poésie et sur la peinture*, written by the French diplomat Abbé Dubos and published in 1719, is considered one of the first – if not the first – text(s) explicitly written as art critique. Long before Kant and his aesthetics, Dubos was indeed the first to establish a link between the « quality » of a painting and its faculty to move the public. It was common at that time to think that *anyone* could appreciate art, because art (meaning : beauty) was first and foremost addressed

³ James Elkins, « Art Criticism » in *The Grove Dictionary of Art* – *Grove Art Online*, 1996. <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T004330>

⁴ Quentin Bell, « The Art Critic and the Art Historian », *Leonardo*, Vol. 13, n°2, Spring 1980, pp. 139-142.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.140.

⁶ Kerr Houston, *Introduction to Art Criticism : Histories, Strategies, Voices*, London, Pearson, 2013, chap. 1.

⁷ Thomas Crow, *La peinture et son public à Paris au XVIII^e siècle*, Paris, Macula, 2000 [1985].

to emotions. In other terms, in the first half of the eighteenth century, art was not a matter of Reason, but of the soul and of the heart. Thus, if anyone could appreciate art, anyone could write about it. This argument was commonly employed by critics to defend their right to publish their texts against the many attacks of the artists from the Académie royale, who were not used to being « written about » with such freedom by lay persons claiming their innocence regarding art, its history or its techniques⁸. From the 1730s, the first public exhibitions of contemporary art had in fact become such popular events, that they generated dozens of brochures, pamphlets, books and articles on the Salon. In prose or in rhyme, intellectually sophisticated or quite vulgar, long or short, serious or funny, illustrated or not, etc. these texts were very diverse both in form and in content. But their common point was that, at this moment, on the discursive level, art criticism's legitimacy was founded on the critics' capacity to speak *for* (i.e. *in the name of*) *the public*, the learned as well as the common. Therefore, as spokespersons for the public, critics's texts were tacitly addressed to the artists from the Académie, and thus, more and more directly, to their protector and main commissioner : the political power.

As a consequence, in the 1750-60s especially, the French monarchy applied an active censorship on art criticism. In fact, art criticism had become a genuinely protean and, above all, completely uncontrollable public discourse both in its « literary » manifestations and its repercussions among the artists. Far from extinguishing the source of unofficial art criticism and published reviews of the Salons, the strict selection operated then by royal authorities had nevertheless two consequences : the first one was that, from now on, anonymity became the rule for « unapproved » art critics for fear of royal censors⁹ ; the second one was that the only art criticism to be « approved » by royal authorities became henceforth one that was mainly written by artists or known *amateurs*¹⁰ and published in books or in the press with a wide circulation (that is to say : already under surveillance), such as *Le Mercure de France*, or *Le Journal de Paris*. In the latter, for example, the section on fine arts was taken up in the 1770s by a history painter, who was then assistant to the secretary for the Académie royale : Antoine Renou¹¹.

In this restricted context, the group of « approved » art critics was forced to slightly alter their rhetoric of self-legitimacy : indeed, if art was still addressed to everyone, there was no way now that *anyone* could write about it. One needed some knowledge (whether practical or theoretical) and some significative credentials to be taken seriously as an art commentator. Although they remained politically neutral – a necessary condition to be published in Paris – even « approved » art critics needed to entertain their readership and, for that purpose, sometimes indulged in a few personal attacks or provocative assertions. As a result, and despite the active vigilance of the royal censors, visual arts were actually, at the end of the century, a lively arena of public controversies and debates on the most crucial questions of the time¹².

⁸ Richard Wrigley, *The Origins of French Art Criticism from the Ancien Régime to the Restauration*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993.

⁹ Another solution to escape the political surveillance is resorting to an alternative mode of circulation of the texts : it is the case of Diderot's *Salons*, for example, which are published in the *Correspondance littéraire* and addressed to a very selective foreign readership between 1759 and 1781.

¹⁰ *Amateurs*, here, must be understood as the group of wealthy and respected gentlemen who were famous for their knowledge of arts and artists, and who were often important collectors and patrons ; on this population, see Charlotte Guichard, *Les amateurs d'Art à Paris au XVIII^e siècle*, Seyssel, Champ Vallon, 2008.

¹¹ Renou himself wrote most of his articles anonymously – not for fear of the royal censors, but probably so as not to engage the Académie's responsibility with his texts. See Roxana Fialcofschi, *Le "Journal de Paris" et les arts visuels, 1777-1788*, Thèse de doctorat, Université Lumière Lyon 2, 2009.

¹² For the analysis of one example of these controversies, on the role of women in the contemporary regeneration of the *École nationale*, see Séverine Sofio, *La parenthèse enchantée. Genre et production des beaux-arts, 1750-1850*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2016, chap. 2. More generally, on this period's art criticism, see Richard Wrigley, « Censorship and Anonymity in Eighteenth-Century French Art Criticism », *Oxford Art Journal*, 6-2, 1983, pp.17-28.

Let's then make a leap in time, until after the French Revolution. Not that the period presents no interest for the analysis of art critics' rhetorics of self-legitimation, but the revolutionary period caused such a radical politicization of both artistic practice and aesthetic issues that the balance of power in the art world and, thus, the internal logics of artists' and critics' activities were temporarily drastically modified¹³. Art criticism itself seems practically brought to a halt during most of the 1790s : published reviews of this period's Salons were actually very few. While most of the artists, reduced to dire straits, sought clients and commissions to earn their living, the deserted contemporary art exhibitions didn't attract as many people as they used to, during the Ancien Régime¹⁴. In the following decade, however, Susan Siegfried has shown how, under the Consulate, new laws on the press changed the situation : newspapers were exempt from censorship as long as they focused on arts, science, literature or trade news. As a consequence, cultural and business journals flourished and, in the mainstream press where political news were standardized by censorship, cultural sections slowly became the real newspapers' markers of identity¹⁵. In this process, journalists ceased to write anonymously in these pages – in other words, with the practice of signature, art critics slowly developed an « ethos of responsibility »¹⁶.

The Napoleonic Empire is also the moment when the political power realized the propaganda potential of a dynamic and much frequented Salon : Dominique-Vivant Denon, in charge of the Empire's cultural politics, managed to lure the most notorious artists back to the Salon and the public's progressive return to the biannual event confirmed that Denon's intuitions were correct¹⁷. In the 1820s, the number of artworks shown at the Salon had grown exponentially, and the public was rushing in the Louvre, regardless of social class and sex, to discover the *École Nationale*'s latest productions. At the same time, the press and editorial market were expanding in an unprecedented way. In this context of massive increasing in the aesthetic offer at the Salon, art criticism's role changed. Critics were now supposed to help the public understanding the artworks (for instance, by explaining a complex iconography or by recontextualizing a painting in its creator's career) and evaluating the artists from a supposed universal, informed and reliable point of view. Art critics didn't write *in the name of the public* anymore : from spokespersons, they progressively became educators, guides and experts who, from now on, addressed their texts *to the public*. Of course, the rhetorical constructions through which they justified their own utility had also evolved : art critics had been made useful by artistic profusion. They were actually supposed to help capable artists to be recognized among the abundance of contemporary creators and, in the same movement, they helped the public to form their taste, understand the stakes of each Salon and distinguish, in each exhibition, « true » works of art from the mere products of mediocrity or fashion. In other words, art critics were now indispensable intermediaries between professional artists and their public, for the benefit of both the former and the latter. Indeed, art critics could present themselves as the defenders of the interests of some group of

¹³ For a detailed analysis of the mechanisms and consequences of the politicization of a sphere of cultural production, see Gisèle Sapiro, « Forms of politicization in the French literary field », *Theory and Society*, 32, 2003, pp. 633-652.

¹⁴ Udolpho Van de Sandt, « La fréquentation des Salons sous l'Ancien Régime, la Révolution et l'Empire », *Revue de l'Art*, 73, 1986, pp. 43-47.

¹⁵ Susan L. Siegfried, « The politicisation of art criticism in the post-revolutionary press » in Michael R. Orwicz, ed. *Art criticism and its institutions in 19th century France*, Manchester University Press, Manchester & New York, 1994, pp.9-28.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ On Denon and his successor's impact on the Salon and, more generally, on the organization of the art world, see Marie-Claude Chaudonneret, *L'État et les artistes. De la restauration à la monarchie de Juillet (1815-1833)*, Paris, Flammarion, 1999, and S. Sofio, *La parenthèse enchantée, op. cit.*, chap. 5. On the public slowly returning to the Salon in the 1800s and 1810s, see U. Van de Sandt, « La fréquentation des Salons sous l'Ancien Régime, la Révolution et l'Empire », *art. cit.*

artists, with whom they could make « common cause » at certain precise moments in history¹⁸. But, at other moments, they also could represent and defend the interests of some sections of the public (e.g. the *connoisseurs*, the Catholics, women, etc. – depending, in general, of the readership of their newspaper). As a result of these multifactorial evolutions, towards the middle of the nineteenth century, art criticism itself had become an autonomous, self-referential discourse, with its famous « names » and its specialized press (*Le Journal des arts*, *L'Artiste*, etc.)¹⁹. Besides, this discursive shift was reflected in another very significant shift in the actual profession of critics, at a time when it was still impossible to be a “professional art critic”. In fact, in the first decade of the nineteenth century, the most influential critics were still artists or respected *amateurs* (Charles Landon, Toussaint Emeric-David, Jean-Baptiste “Publicola” Chaussard, Pierre-Alexandre Coupin de la Couperie, etc.), as it was the case before the Revolution. Twenty years later, however, the vast majority of art critics were writers and journalists (Adolphe Thiers, Théophile Thoré, Théophile Gautier, Jules Janin, Gustave Planche, etc.) This social and professional evolution is absolutely central in the history of art criticism, since it took place at a moment when artists completely lost the actual monopoly of public discourse on the fine arts, to the – lasting – benefit of aspiring members of the literary field²⁰.

Retracing the history of art criticism was our first step. The next one is to establish the existence of active women in this domain, so that we can, as a third and last step, re-make the history of art criticism with gender as our framework of interpretation.

3. From the history of female critics to a gendered history of criticism

3.1. Establishing the existence of women critics

In 2012 the first history and critical anthology of women who wrote on the fine arts in Europe between 1750 and 1850 was published. It took the form of a two-volume book entitled *Plumes et pinceaux*, and was edited by Mechtilde Fend, Melissa Hyde and Anne Lafont (for the historical part) and by Anne Lafont with the help of Charlotte Foucher and Amandine Gorse (for the anthology)²¹. This voluminous book was explicitly initiated on a compensatory perspective : the purpose, Anne Lafont explains in the introduction of the first volume (Lafont 2012a, pp.12-13), was to complete the

¹⁸ The painters from the « generation of 1820 » for instance (those who were, later, called the « Romantics »), were actively supported by young critics from the same generation, sharing with them several social characteristics, an equivalent position in their respective field – artistic or literary – and the same aspiration to official consecration. On this « generation of 1820 » in the history of nineteenth-century French painting, see Sébastien Allard (dir.), *Paris 1820. L'affirmation de la génération romantique*, Bern, Peter Lang Verlag, 2005. On the rather ambiguous relations of art critics and painters at that time, see Séverine Sofio, « ‘Toutes les directions sont incertaines et combattues’ : les peintres, les critiques et l’imposition de la bataille romantique », *Sociétés et Représentations*, n°40, 2015, pp. 163-182. A similar configuration of « common cause » between certain critics and certain artists at the Salon took place at the end of the 1840s, in the context of the development of the notion of « art social » - see Neil McWilliam, Catherine Méneux and Julie Ramos (dir.), *L'Art social en France de la Révolution à la Grande Guerre*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes/ INHA, 2014.

¹⁹ To illustrate the self-referential nature of the genre, one can mention the example of Baudelaire’s first *Salons* (1845 and 1846), in which the poet and critic not only drew heavily on the example of Diderot’s *Salons* (published in 1844 for the first time), but also quoted Stendhal’s *Salons* and dedicated his reviews of the annual exhibition to one of the most famous critics of his time : Théophile Gautier.

²⁰ This radical change has, of course, different origins – for a more thorough analysis of this phenomenon, see S. Sofio, « ‘Toutes les directions sont incertaines et combattues’... », *art. cit.*

²¹ For a review of international literature on women and art criticism in nineteenth-century fine arts, see Foucher-Zarmanian, Charlotte 2015, « Les femmes artistes sous presse. Les créatrices vues par les femmes critiques d’art dans la presse féminine et féministe en France autour de 1900 », *Sociétés et représentations*, n°40, pp. 111-127. For a general overview of this issue : Wendelin Guentner (ed.), *Women Art Critics in Nineteenth-Century France. Vanishing Acts*, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 2013.

very impressive and official *Dictionnaire critique des historiens de l'art actifs en France de la Révolution à la Première Guerre mondiale*, edited online by Claire Barbillon and Philippe Sénéchal, on the website of the Institut national d'histoire de l'art. The *Dictionnaire des historiens de l'art* includes more than 400 entries of French-speaking art historians and critics, and continues to be updated until today. If several entries do honor some male writers whose posterity is limited to a few historians, Germaine de Staël, Julie Candelles, Marceline Desbordes-Valmore or Claude Vignon (to mention only a few of the most famous female critics for the first half of the nineteenth century) were nowhere to be seen. Only one and a half women actually have an entry in the *Dictionnaire des historiens de l'art* (one and a half, since one of them shares an entry with her husband).

Plumes et pinceaux therefore aimed at re-establishing these forgotten (or left aside ?) female critics and their part in the history of art, from the beginning of art criticism itself. This historiographical operation is the basis of Women Studies and of French “*histoire des femmes*” : rebuilding a historical canon integrating women's lives and achievements, was intended to transform a biased perception of the past. The purpose is to actively oppose the « denial of precedence (*déni d'antériorité*) » as Delphine Naudier puts it to explain how their lack of a recognized posterity had deprived female artists of any “creative roots” and of predecessors of the same sex in any artistic domain, forcing each generation to be pioneers and exceptions, again and again²².

The texts published in the *Plumes et pinceaux* anthology were selected on the basis of a few precise criteria : their historical interest ; their formal quality ; their originality and their impact on their contemporaries – a special focus, by these authors, on women artists or their association with feminist (or what we could anachronically call « proto-feminist ») ideas are explicitly not among those criteria. The result of this selection is a very heterogenous ensemble of nearly thirty texts : their only common point is indeed that they were written by women. As a matter of fact, few of those texts actually address women's artworks and only a couple of them may be qualified as feminist. They are extremely different in form and in content : there are poems, playlets or short stories ; there are some correspondance, some technical texts or articles for the press – either mainstream or women's press ; they are written in a humoristic or serious tone ; they are neutral, autobiographical or political... As for the critics themselves, they are women of different nationality, social status, age, political views and their integration in (and knowledge of) the art world seems also very diverse. Therefore, regarding both the texts and the critics, one can only conclude that there is actually more in common, in terms of style and aesthetic opinions, between Etienne-Jean Delécluze and Marie d'Agoult, than between Marie d'Agoult and Joanna von Haza, her German contemporary also selected in the anthology, for example...

There is a paradox, then, in seeing that a “detour” through a women-only anthology of texts, is necessary to realize that, if there actually *were* a lot of female critics, there is however no such thing as a *feminine* art criticism.

3.2. Gendering the history of criticism by taking women into account

We can draw two important conclusions (among others) from a closer study of these female critics' individual and collective biographies, regarding their integration in the “general” history of art criticism.

For instance, from 1750 to 1850, we have seen earlier that there was a very clear shift in the profession of male critics : as a matter of fact, this shift is also visible among female critics of that time. As men

²² Delphine Naudier, *La cause littéraire des femmes. Modes d'accès et modalités de consécration des femmes dans le champ littéraire (1970-1998)*, Thèse de doctorat en sociologie, Paris, EHESS, 2000.

writing on arts were, for a huge majority, artists and renown *amateurs* at the end of the eighteenth century, women were also, at the same period, artists (like Maria Cosway or Elisabeth Vigée-Lebrun) and respected *amateurs* (like Julie Candeilles, Germaine de Staël or Félicité de Genlis). As men, though, most women writing on the fine arts before the Revolution were anonymous (there is even a serious possibility that these proclaimed women were in fact men writing under disguise, as I'll explain later). After the Revolution, as we have seen for male critics indeed, on the one hand, anonymity ceased to be the rule in the first decades of the nineteenth century, and, on the other hand, artists and amateurs slowly lost the monopoly of public discourse on the fine arts, to the benefit of writers and poets (like Marie d'Agoult or Marceline Desbordes-Valmore) or journalists (like Alida de Savignac).

Finally, let's take a look at the texts produced by these women. In their productions, we clearly see that the rhetorical shift that we had identified in the male critics' self-legitimizing discourses (speaking *in the name of* the public, and then *to* the public), was also completely valid for their female counterparts. Besides, this shift is all the more important to underline for women critics, that it is the actual basis of their historiographical marginalization. At the end of the eighteenth century, in France, sensitivity was considered an essentially feminine quality – as opposed to the masculine Reason – and at the same time, as we have seen earlier, a necessary quality to appreciate art. In this context, women were considered the paragon of the illiterate public in the Salon : as purely emotional beings, women were supposed to be perfect receivers to Beauty and Art. Women had thus, in those few decades, a true legitimacy as critics and spokespersons for the public. That is the reason why so many articles, pamphlets and brochures published about the Salon between the 1770s and 1800s in particular, were seemingly written by women – *seemingly*, because their authors' obviously fake names may have actually hidden male critics, writing under a female identity to enjoy women's then « privileged situation » as commentators of the Salons, as Heather Belnap Jensen explains²³. However this situation ended when the role of the critic changed, as we explained in the first part of this essay. From the 1820s onwards, critics were not supposed to be the public's spokespersons anymore, but they were expected to be guides and experts for the many visitors of prolific and unsettling Salons. Art critics' legitimacy, therefore, was based on their (supposed) knowledge of the fine arts, on their reliable taste and on their ability to take some distance and speak for posterity – in one word : on the *universality* of their position. A situation that, of course, women could hardly claim for themselves... unless they developed a few specific strategies. For instance, if Marie d'Agoult managed to publish her critiques of the Salon in the mainstream press (which was quite rare at her time for a woman), it was under a male pseudonym (« Daniel Stern »). On the contrary, Alida de Savignac mainly wrote for the feminine press (*Le journal des demoiselles*) and Marceline Desbordes-Valmore expressed her views on the arts of her time, not in newspaper articles, but in the course of her novels or poems.

Art criticism's myriad of texts had actually directly contributed to *make* art what it is – in other terms, from the eighteenth century onward, art critics have played a significative part in the institutionalization process of art. Studying the history of art criticism, thus, is making the history of this process and – in general – of every type of “social commitment” in/with art at one given time²⁴. If the history of art and the history of art criticism are in fact two aspects of the same operation, then gendering one without gendering the other proves to make no sense at all.

²³ Heather Belnap Jensen, « Le privilège des femmes dans la critique d'art en France, 1785-1815 », *Sociétés et représentations*, n°40, 2015, pp. 145-162.

²⁴ Judith Lyon-Caen et Dinah Ribard, « Historiographies. L'activité et l'écriture critiques entre presse et littérature, XVIIIe-XIXe siècles », *Contextes*, 11, 2012 (article en ligne).

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