

Critical Writing for the Future

by Arie Altena



In this article Arie Altena looks back on the Critical Writing Workshops that Sonic Acts has organised over the past ten years. These workshops took place during the festivals and other Sonic Acts events. They offered young writers and students the opportunity to improve their writing skills, and develop a critical approach to interdisciplinary and new art practices. The workshops functioned as a space to experiment with new ways of critical writing. Through their critical texts they also offered Sonic Acts a way to engage with its audience on a deeper, critical level.

Cover photo

Potential Wor(l)ds Workshop, Anna Bunting-Branch and Aliyah Hussain, Sonic Acts Academy 2020. Photo by Pieter Kers



Critical Writing Workshop, Sonic Acts Festival 2019, De Brakke Grond, Amsterdam. Photo by Pieter Kers

Since at least 2008, Sonic Acts has brought together a group of young writers, bloggers and students to write about its festival. Sonic Acts started doing this because of a lack of critical reflection on the interdisciplinary works and performances that were featured at the festival in mainstream media and traditional (print) media. Gathering a group of volunteers, students and young bloggers to report on the concerts, lectures, performances, masterclasses, installations, and critically reflect on subjects covered at the festival, was a practical way to produce reviews contributing to the visibility of the festival. In the beginning Sonic Acts offered students the possibility to visit the festival free of charge in return for critical coverage. These students more or less spontaneously formed a group that worked together, supervised by one of the curators and an experienced writer. That the bloggers and students were themselves implicated in the field they were reviewing, as they were aspiring artists and critics who cared for the field of art and technology, was seen as an advantage.

In 2012, a proper Critical Writing Workshop (CWW) was set up by Sonic Acts in collaboration with media partners such as magazines Gonzo Circus, Neural and The Wire. It has become an annually recurring workshop in which upcoming journalists, critics and bloggers –

from a generation of digital natives – become proficient in critical writing about artistic research and current developments in art and music. Since 2012 it has been part of the programme of all the Sonic Acts festivals and academies, and it has been included in the Dark Ecology programmes (a Dutch-Norwegian-Russian collaboration, 2014–2016) as well. The international calls for participation always received much response, indicating a need for such a workshop. The workshops usually include presentations about the craft of writing about art, the editing process and the function of critical reflection on art. During the workshop, participants write reviews of events, and during this process receive feedback from the course leaders and each other. The CWWs are based on the conviction that learning from each other in a workshop situation, working collaboratively on texts, editing each others' texts, is an optimal way of progressing in the art of writing critically.

In 2019, Urban Paradoxes conducted a qualitative research of how the participants valued the workshop. Some interviewees stated that 'they felt like the workshop was important for them in the process of becoming a more critical writer'. They also said that they felt stimulated by the workshop leaders to reflect critically, and were inspired by the interdisciplinarity of the programme, as well as by working in the context of a festival.

With the CWW, Sonic Acts is taking an in-depth look at the current artistic production, and stimulates a critical exchange between artistic practice and research. It looks at how artistic production and research are connected with developments in culture, society and politics, as well as with the interests, questions, feelings and motivations brought in by the audience.

The Value of Embedded Critical Writing

This goes beyond informing a public about new developments in order to convince them to attend the events: critical texts are concerned with engaging the public over a longer time span. A critical text shows its own involvement in the things it describes and critically reviews, and is clear about its own interests. The aim of such a text is rather to engage the reader with those interests, and show how these interests are entangled with other issues. This connects to the aim of CWW to foster new critical voices with diverse cultural backgrounds. CWW strives to be a breeding ground for a new generation of 'media makers' who get the space to develop their voices and experiment with new forms of art criticism that engage a culturally diverse audience of digital natives.

The results of the CWW are usually published on the CWW-blog¹. However, this is only one part of Sonic Acts' efforts to stimulate critical reflection on current artistic production and research. Since 2001, the Sonic Acts Festival has been accompanied by the publication of a book giving context and depth to the research and themes of the festival through commissioned essays, interviews with artists and theorists, and visual material. Until recently, additional texts and videos were regularly published online as the Sonic Acts

¹ <http://sonicacts.com/critical/>

Research Series. These were mostly interviews and commissioned essays that gave the public also a chance to follow the research of the Sonic Acts curatorial team throughout the year. Since 2019 the focus has been more on the publication of documentation of the most recent events as well as earlier festivals. The CWW thus is not an isolated undertaking, but is embedded amongst other efforts of Sonic Acts. It has happened that writers who start out at the CWW later find their texts published as an instalment of the Research Series² or in a Sonic Acts publication.

The CWW is not the only project initiated by an arts organisation that tries to stimulate critical writing. Similar undertakings are the writing programme of Kunsthuis SYB, SYB Circles (NL)³, Kritikklabbet (SE)⁴, the mentorship programme De Nieuwe Garde, publishing projects of the Institute of Network Cultures (NL)⁵ and the Talk About Music Course at the Darmstädter Ferienkurse 2018⁶. These give similar reasons for the need to develop new forms of critical writing: the transformation of arts and music, the changed status of critical writing, the decline of criticism in mainstream media, the fourth industrial revolution and the rise of social media. For arts organisations the primary motivation is often to make sure there will be critical reflection on the projects they've curated.

Critical writing remains very valuable and an important ingredient of a 'thriving' culture and art ecology. It connects art to concerns of people, it gives answers to questions the audience might have, it contextualises and embeds art in the larger social, cultural and artistic milieu, it connects different forms of art, it shows why a piece of art is relevant, how it relates to issues in other fields, and why it motivates and moves an audience. It can also emphasise the importance of culturally diverse perspectives. Critical writing can also speculate further on ideas put forward by an artwork or festival, or stimulate such further thinking; it can show what is lacking, or 'how to do it yourself'.

The value of critical writing is emphasised the Amsterdam-based Institute of Network Cultures. Their researcher Miriam Rasch stated: 'Technological, economical and aesthetic developments in what is called "the fourth industrial revolution" have put considerable strain on public critical reflection.⁷ With the INC she considers this a problem because, 'critically assessing artistic and cultural productions in an open and inclusive media sphere is a prerequisite for a reflective society.⁸ She formulates concisely why a platform for critical writing, and the stimulation of new critical voices is of the utmost importance. It's in critical writing that we can 'formulate both ethically and aesthetically what it means to be human (together) in a given time and place; to critically evaluate the desirability of the status quo; and to envision possible (other) futures.' And she adds to that: 'In this way, art criticism is connected to the establishment of a critical culture, which can be seen as essential to a strong democratic culture.⁹

² <http://sonicacts.com/portal/research-series/overview>

³ <http://kunsthuisnyb.nl/programma/schrijversprogramma/>

⁴ <http://kritikklabbet.se/>

⁵ <https://networkcultures.org/artofcriticism/>, and see also <https://networkcultures.org/makingpublic/>

⁶ <https://internationales-musikinstitut.de/de/ferienkurse/da2018/>

⁷ See <https://networkcultures.org/artofcriticism/2018/03/13/join-our-expanding-network-on-the-art-of-criticism-and-participate-in-research-and-experiments/>

⁸ Idem.

⁹ Idem.

A Change in Criticism

Criticism has changed as much as the arts have changed in post-digital times. It has changed as much as the way in which we inform ourselves about the arts and music, and what this means to us. Though some conservatives might disagree, critical writing is something else than handing out value judgements. The function of value judgement and recommendation is now largely in the hands of algorithms and social media. It has been radically 'democratised' (or platformised) and automated. Data is harvested habitually for recommendation systems that have made value judgements by authoritative cultural critics largely superfluous. The flip-side of this is not the decline of elite-culture, but the fact that all these data are owned and handled by corporations.¹⁰ But as Dutch essay writer Miriam Rasch states: 'Anyone can open a twitter account and start a blog. Yet, the second step is even more important: the one that takes us from voicing an opinion to meaningful and purposeful reflection.'¹¹

Critical Writing and Experience

Since its very beginning in 1994 Sonic Acts has stressed the experiential quality of the activities and works it presented. The organisation always took great care in staging the concerts, audiovisual performances, films, sound installations, field trips and lectures so the audience could immerse itself in the experience. This was based both on the belief that these activities and works deserved such a presentation, and also that the sensory quality of these works enables the enjoyment and understanding of these works without a prior knowledge of the history of art, motivations of the artist or the context of contemporary art. Looking, listening, with open senses and an open mind, is where the impact and the value of art starts.

The task of critical writing then becomes to stimulate the involvement of the audience in the work by zooming in on the experience, bringing out the various levels and aspects of the experience of the work, or by engaging the audience more deeply with the creative process. Such an engagement means a deeper and more lasting felt connection to the experience, the work and the issues that are touched upon in the experience. Such critical writing makes the experience of a festival relevant beyond just having fun on a night out.

Giving shape, as a cultural organisation, to a reflection on the experience of art, is a way to connect an audience to the organisation. Stimulating critical writing is then an aspect of audience development. It is a way of giving form to an audience, that together feels

¹⁰ The detrimental effects of this fall outside the scope of this essay. You can think of the slow emergence of surveillance capitalism as well as filter bubbles, the lure of lowest denominator and the attractiveness of stupidity which seems to be inherent in the recommendation algorithm of youtube.

¹¹ Miriam Rasch, 'Divide and conquer: the future of online criticism, review of The Digital Critic: Literary Culture Online', on <http://www.miriamrasch.nl/nieuwe-media/divide-and-conquer-the-future-of-online-criticism/>, 29 April 2018.

connected in a certain experience of a work of art, and through that becomes also involved in a more in-depth discussion of the creative process, motivations, ideas and issues. Such critical writing looks towards creating a community and a communality, it will try to formulate what the audience has in common, instead of pointing to the irreducible originality of the work of art, created as the highly individual expression of authentic feeling of an artist.¹² Such critical writing looks at entanglements first.

Entanglements

How to write about today's hybrid practices at the intersection of art, music, technology and science and do justice to their inherent complexity and entanglements? During the 2019 CWW, the Dutch art critic, curator and researcher Ingrid Commandeur attempted to sketch what could be considered to be 'good critical writing' now. She highlighted how the conventional idea of the artwork shifts to a materialist notion of practice. One aspect of this shift is that 'the notion of agency and politics is relocated again within art and design as part of a complex, interlocking system, leading to a new aesthetics based on entanglement and co-constitution'. Good old art criticism used to contain description (what do I see), analysis (how is the work organised), interpretation (what is the message), and finally judgement (is it successful). Such writing isolates the art practice from the world, reduces a pluriform practice to a singular object, presupposes a hidden meaning which needs to be revealed, and enforces a judgmental criticism, successful or not, five or no stars. It also grants the human a centralised position, whereas post-humanism challenges us to think beyond the mind-body split, and beyond the binary opposition of human – non-human. Commandeur stressed that for the critic it is important to recognise one's own embeddedness in the object or cultural moment, and one's stance in relation to it. To be critical is not only about analysing, deconstructing, and judging, but about inhabiting a problem. In writing one has to recognise that meaning is never produced in isolation but rather through intricate webs of connectedness and participation. Commandeur proposed another model in which questions like Who is addressed and how? How does the work of art take position? and How does the work address or intervene in the complexity of the world? are central.

¹² For the shift from an art ruled by the Romantic idea of individual authentic expression to art as the attempt to research what we have in common, see Ruben Jacobs *Iedereen een kunstenaar. Over authenticiteit, kunstenaarschap en creatieve industrie, V2_*, Rotterdam, 2014. English translation: *Everyone is an Artist, V2_* Rotterdam, 2015.

Practical Recommendations for the Future

Practically speaking stimulating critical writing has provided Sonic Acts with texts on commissioned works, interviews with artists, and reviews of events that otherwise would not have existed. There are however several aspects that until now have not yet sufficiently or explicitly been addressed in the CWWs and that could provide directions for future editions.

Reflecting critically through the use of images, sound recordings, podcasts, video, and various ways of online publishing (from ebooks to Instagram stories) as well as using different outlets to disseminate this content, is key to communicating with the second generation of digital natives.¹³ Until now the CWWs have mainly focused on writing texts between 800 and 1600 words long.

Critical writing preferably accommodates different voices and different cultures. Though all the CWWs had international participants, most of them were somehow rooted in Western culture, and wrote in English. Using and accommodating different languages is difficult but important. Different countries, regions and organisations have different cultural histories and contexts that also have an effect on the position and form of critical writing. Cultural differences have not disappeared because 'everyone' supposedly uses the same social media-platform or tries to communicate in international English. The use of international English as lingua franca can only be practical solution for stimulating a cross-cultural dialogue. More attention to translation, both between languages as well as cultures, would be welcome in order to be able to truly learn from each other and understand cultural differences.

After organising several CWWs, Sonic Acts has begun to explore the idea of creating a more steady 'critical writing team', recruited from the participants of previous workshops. This would be a community of writers and editors that collaborate on new critical writing, to be published on a multi-lingual platform, syndicated by partner media. Such a community and platform could be a next step in the stimulation of critical writing, and the building of an engaged audience for the arts. In a world where experience of the audience is central, it's critical writing that can contextualise this experience, and activate the audience to reflect: why is this experience of art important to us? Through writing we can tease out the shifts in how and why we appreciate art and how it relates to our daily lives, or for that matter, to politics, an idea of democracy, the future, dealing with cultural differences, or how art relates to the desire for a better, more inclusive society. A discussion of the experience of art, in the end is never just a discussion of only art, but also, be it implicitly, on how we relate to the world, make our world, what we identify with (or not), or how we would like to give form to society or prepare for the challenges that lie ahead.

¹³ The oldest members of the first generation of digital natives are born around 1986 (going online when they were about 10), they are now over 30 and have kids that quite soon will go and visit concerts and exhibitions. The second generation of digital natives is already here.

BIOGRAPHIES

Arie Altena (NL) is an editor, writer and researcher who works in the field of art and technology. He is an editor at V2_ in Rotterdam, and as part of the Sonic Acts team co-organised numerous Sonic Acts festival editions and projects such as Kontraste and Dark Ecology. He has edited several Sonic Acts publications, and is the author of *Wat is community art?* (2017).

CONTEXT

This article is part of the *Re-Imagine Europe* publication. The publication collects articles, essays, interviews and reports about audience engagement for interdisciplinary arts organisations. It aims to share knowledge gained throughout the *Re-Imagine Europe* project with professionals in the cultural sector who would like to gain a deeper insight in audience development and capacity building.

Re-Imagine Europe (2017-2021) is a four-year project of ten cultural organizations from across Europe, responding to the current social and political challenges. With a programme of residencies, commissions, symposia and workshops, the project partners stimulate both artistic production and audience development. They experiment with new ways of reaching out to their audiences, motivated by the ambition to develop a broader and more engaging approach to audience development and capacity building.

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