Hélène Jannière Université Rennes 2
Paolo Scrivano Politecnico di Milano

Committed, Politicized, or Operative: Figures of Engagement in Criticism from 1945 to Today

In 1995, in an article on the renewal of criticism published in the French journal *Le Visiteur*, architect and critic Bernard Huet related to Charles Baudelaire to expound his position on the subject.[1] Determined to emphasize architectural criticism's separation from history and theory, and therefore to highlight its peculiar disciplinary distinction, Huet espoused an idea of engaged criticism connoting the latter for its social and political function in the spatial domain. Huet specifically referred to a passage in one of Baudelaire's writings (the *Salon de 1846*), where the terms *partiale, passionnée, politique* — partial, impassionate, and political — were used to indicate art criticism's chief attributes.[2]

Engagement has often been seen as an intrinsic characteristic of architectural criticism, if not as one of the defining traits of the discipline: however, this

1 Bernard Huet, "Les enjeux de la critique," *Le Visiteur* 1 (Fall 1995), 88–97.

2 Charles Baudelaire, "À quoi bon la critique" in *Salon de 1846* (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1846), 2. On this subject see: Hélène Jannière, *Critique et architecture. Un état des lieux contemporain* (Paris: Éditions de la Villette, 2019), 21–3.

https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2611-0075/13275 | ISSN 2611-0075

view has been more pervasive in particular chronological settings and cultural contexts. During the 1990s, for example, a widespread nostalgy for a notion of criticism associated to the historical avant-gardes emerged perhaps as a reaction to a tendency of the 1980s to identify criticism with "communication" or even with the promotion of architects and architectures. This "committed" or "politicized" approach to criticism emphasized the critic's influential and active role in discovering, promoting, and intellectually supporting groups of artists or architects. The idea of a "golden age" of criticism began thus to spread in architectural historiography, being from time to time related either to the end of the 19th century, to the 1920s, or to the 1960s and 1970s.

The present introduction has no pretension to thoroughly discuss the question of criticism's engagement since 1945, in its artistic, intellectual, or political implications. It is necessary to remind, however, that architectural criticism emerged in the postwar years as a solidly established and largely recognized cultural practice in specific geographical contexts. It was the case, for example, of Italy, where Bruno Zevi ushered in an approach to criticism that would be later labeled as "operative". "Operative criticism", in fact, was a definition coined *ex post* by Manfredo Tafuri, but that Zevi intentionally endorsed to the point of founding in 1970 a department under the same denomination at the University of Rome La Sapienza, the Istituto di critica operativa dell'architettura (Institute of architecture's operative criticism), of which he became the first director. Zevi's activity as an engaged critic had its roots in early works such as *Verso un'architettura organica* and *Saper vedere l'architettura* — published in 1945 and 1948 respectively — and fully matured through the experience as director of the journal *L'architettura. Cronache e storia* and as columnist for the weekly *L'Espresso*.[3]

The rewards of Zevi's action would be reaped in the following decades. In fact, one of the most important breaking points in the history of 20th-century architectural criticism corresponds to the 1960s, a decade marked by the fading of the faith in a "progressive" idea of architecture and, as a consequence, by the decline of a kind of engaged and operative criticism that had accompanied its development since the years immediately preceding the Second World War. It was precisely at that time that Tafuri coined the expression critica operativa (operative criticism), indeed the title of the fourth chapter of his *Teorie e storia dell'architettura*, a volume first published in 1968.[4] Locating the origins of an "operative" attitude in Giovanni Pietro Bellori's *Vita de' pittori, scultori et architetti moderni (*The life of painters, sculptors and modern architects, 1672), a book that was singled out for unveiling an engagement in and commitment to the narrated events, Tafuri defined — and implicitly condemned — operative criticism as "analysis of architecture" intended to "design" a precise poetical aim "[…] anticipated in its structures, and resulting from programmatically finalized

3 Bruno Zevi, *Verso un'architettura organica* (Turin: Einaudi, 1945); id., *Saper vedere l'architettura* (Turin: Einaudi, 1948).

4 Manfredo Tafuri, *Teorie e storia dell'architettura* (Bari: Laterza, 1968), 161–93.

and deformed historical analyses."[5] As such, Tafuri claimed, operative criticism could only result from the encounter between history and architectural design, "projecting" history toward the future (Tafuri played with the double meaning of the verb "progettare", "to project", both "to cast forward" and "to design"). In the context of the late 1960s, when *Teorie e storia dell'architettura* was released, operative criticism appeared "too compromised" with architects and architectural activity, in particular with the narration of the Modern Movement, later further denounced in Tafuri's *Progetto e Utopia. Architettura e sviluppo capitalistico* of 1973.[6]

Through his controversial stance vis-à-vis the question of engagement, Tafuri set the tone for a discussion that would dominate criticism — and its understanding — for years to come, perhaps even beyond his own intents. Luca Monica has noted that Tafuri's position, as expressed in *Teorie e storia dell'architettura*, disclosed a paradox: thanks to the influence acquired in the years following the publication of the 1968 book, the Roman author almost "set to zero" existing traditions of criticism (in particular in Italy), building upon entirely new foundations a sort of historical criticism; moreover, he *de facto* reserved for himself the role of true "operative critic", a role taken on through an intense activity as academic and public intellectual.[7] It could be added that the paradox extended to delineate Tafuri both as an advocate of operative criticism and as an interested party of it.

What is certain is that, in spite of the degree of miscomprehension that characterized their circulation, Tafuri's views emerged soon as the principal yardstick within the international debate over the role and the duties of architectural criticism. The already-mentioned Bernard Huet, who became one of the main champions in France of Italian architectural culture of the 1960s and 1970s, in his preface to the French edition of *Progetto e Utopia* gave Tafuri credit for having employed "operative criticism" to succeed where other critics and historians had failed, that is, for shedding light on the crisis of modern architecture by revealing "its mythical origin". Huet claimed that, in order "To put this critique into effect," Tafuri had taken "[…] a fundamentally different perspective from the one used by traditional historians who operate within the problematic framework of art history." In Huet's view, Tafuri had produced a significant breakup, by challenging "[…] those who, claiming to be inspired by the Marxist thought, situate their point of view 'inside' the intellectual work and […] legitimize the survival of a myth that their predecessors E. Kauffman, N. Pevsner or S. Giedion had largely contributed to create in the 1930s."[8]

The negative assessment of operative criticism expressed in 1968 only anticipated a more general rebuff on the part of Tafuri of criticism in its entirety

---

5 Ibid., 161.

6 Manfredo Tafuri, *Progetto e Utopia. Architettura e sviluppo capitalistico* (Bari: Laterza, 1973).

7 Luca Monica, *Postfazione. La critica operativa come letteratura artistica dell'architettura degli ultimi cinquant'anni* in Luca Monica (ed.), *La critica operativa e l'architettura* (Milan: Unicopli, 2002), 156–96.

8 Bernard Huet, *Préface* in Manfredo Tafuri, *Projet et utopie* (Paris: Bordas, 1979), IV.

— the famous statement "there is no criticism, only history", voiced in 1986 in an interview to Richard Ingersoll.[9] As it has been noted, it might be limiting to reduce Tafuri's intellectual trajectory in the final decades of his career to an attempt to completely abandon political commitment in favor of a philological approach to the study of architecture.[10] Tafuri's stance against criticism and in support of history did not reject criticism per se, it rather asserted that criticism should include a historical approach even if in relation to the present time. Still, one cannot but wondering whether Tafuri ended up "kidnapping" almost unintentionally a large portion of the discussion over engaged criticism.

The reception of the expression "operative criticism", as well as its appropriation by different commentators or actors, would deserve a dedicated research, in view of the multiple meanings it might have taken over time. After Tafuri's initial definition, the notion of "operative criticism" prompted a wide range of reactions and comments. In the first place, the break with operative criticism was welcomed as a positive transformation: its abandonment was seen as finally allowing the coming to the fore of a form of criticism based on "scientific" criteria, as it was the ambition of many during the 1960s and 1970s. Afterwards, operative criticism became the object of a nostalgic reappropriation. During the 1980s, for instance, criticism linked to the avant-garde movements of the interwar period became one of the most frequently cited cases of a sort of "golden age", seen — as it was — as a perfect embodiment of closed proximity between architects and critics and of criticism's engagement in the architects' activity. Since the 1990s, a nostalgy emerged for specific moments of the history of criticism, being them the perceived intellectual sophistication of Italian criticism of the 1950s and 1960s (incarnated by Ernesto Nathan Rogers's *Casabella-Continuità*) or the kind of "fighting spirit" characterizing British criticism in the postwar years (from *The Architectural Review to Architectural Design*, and with Nikolaus Pevsner or Reyner Banham as its protagonists).

Albeit neither sinking into pessimism nor giving way to nostalgy, during his tenure as director of *Domus* François Burckhardt identified the 1990s as marking the end of what he named "great criticism". Burckhardt attributed this season's closing off to the disappearance of figures such as those of Giulio Carlo Argan, Sigfried Giedion, or Ernst Gombrich — and one could add Manfredo Tafuri or Reyner Banham to this list — who could hold conflictual and controversial positions within the architectural debate.[11] Burckhardt noted that architects had gradually replaced critics, with the former expressing major theoretical positions and the latter relegated to an increasingly dependent function of mediators. Burckhardt's argumentation unveiled the ongoing inversion of roles between architects and critics, a change that reflected similar trends in the art

9 "There is no criticism, only history," *Design Book Review* (Spring 1986); republished in *Casabella* 619–620 (January-February 1995), 96–9.

10 Carla Keyvanian, "Manfredo Tafuri: From the Critique of Ideology to Microhistories," *Design Issues* 16: 1 (Spring 2000), 3–15.

11 "Architettura e media: il futuro delle riviste di architettura/Architecture and Media: The Future of the Architectural Magazines," *Domus* 790 (February 1997), 55.

field. For long "discoverers" active in the art market, critics would less and less associate their names to a group or a movement and test, as Nathalie Heinich has put, their "power of intervention in the realm of art."[12]

Well beyond this operation of social distinction, in Pierre Bourdieu's sense, critics were often the principal guarantors of the theoretical coherence of groups of artists, as exemplified by the case of Pierre Restany with the *nouveaux réalistes* in France and by that of Germano Celant with *arte povera* in Italy. In the domain of architecture, among the critics who after the Second World War cemented the coherence of a movement by stating common theoretical principles one can include Reyner Banham with New Brutalism in the United Kingdom and perhaps Arthur Drexler, Colin Rowe, and Kenneth Frampton with the New York Five in the United States.[13] The privilege of the critic, consisting in the power to place a group on an artistic or cultural map, was gradually sidelined, disappearing thus behind the role of mediation. At one point, a type of engaged criticism not reduced to the promotion of architects and to a "star system" model — according to a definition coined by François Chaslin — where architectural criticism and communication strategies of high-profile architectural firms almost collude began to appear outmoded to most.[14]

This issue of *Histories of Postwar Architecture* collects studies dedicated to historical examples of "committed" and "politicized" criticism, soliciting a reflection on the real meanings of these concepts and on the themes and subjects to which they are tied. On the one hand, the figure of "committed" critic might be linked to the art and architecture avant-gardes from the end of the 19th century onward, hence defining a privileged relationship between the critic and the artist or the architect; on the other, "politicized" criticism can be characterized as the understanding in political terms of architectural and city phenomena.

Partial, impassionate, and political, the three terms evoked by Huet and recalled at the beginning of this text, do not completely portray Baudelaire's thought, if one fails to notice that in the passage where they had been used the French poet described committed criticism as linked to Romanticism and, therefore, as the expression of "the morality of the century".[15] By quoting Baudelaire, in fact, Huet referred to the practice of the *critique influent* (the influential critic), which emerged at the time of the decline of the official *Salons* and the coming to the fore of the first avant-garde movements, rather than to the form of criticism that developed during the 18th-century as a "specific and autonomous literary

12 Nathalie Heinich, *Le triple jeu de l'art contemporain: sociologie des arts plastiques* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1998), 267.

13 *Five architects: Eisenman, Graves, Gwathmey, Hejduk, Meier* (New York: Wittenborn, 1972); on New Brutalism, see the essay by Silvia Groaz included in this volume.

14 François Chaslin, *Critique d'architecture* in *Dictionnaire de l'architecture du xxe siècle* (Paris: Hazan, 1995), 223–24; Id., *Architecture and Criticism* in Mohammad al-Asad and Majd Musa (eds.), *Architectural Criticism and Journalism: Global Perspectives* (Turin: Allemandi, 2006), 21–7.

15 Charles Baudelaire, "Qu'est ce que le Romantisme?," in *Salon de 1846* cit., 5.

genre" to provide judgment, evaluation or consecration for painters' careers.[16] The traditional function of the critic, to discern in a normative way art from non-art, evolved into a function of anticipation: more militant, the critic was expected to support young artists who were breaking away from existing traditions.[17] In the history of 19th- and 20th-century architecture, examples of "committed critics" abound and they include the likes of John Ruskin, William Morris, Sigfried Giedion, Nikolaus Pevsner, and Reyner Banham.[18]

The second possible way of considering the critic's role takes into account political commitment. In architecture, politically engaged criticism has often encompassed a vast array of meanings, from social criticism of architecture (as a disciplinary stance modeled on the social history of art or architecture), to social and political criticism of the urban phenomenon (as it was often the case during the 1960s and 1970s), to the explicit espousing of specific political positions, with critics becoming either *compagnons de route* or members of a political party or organization. In most commentaries on engaged criticism these different meanings — aesthetic and political commitment — tend to overlap. In an article titled "Does Architecture Criticism Matter?", published in 2014 in *Domus*, Joseph Rykwert remarked in fact that the French expression *critique militante*, one that "[…] might more gently translate as 'engaged criticism'," almost qualifies as "[…] an oxymoron since we often see the critic as detached, above the fray, calmly formulating judgements and not engaging in jousts or disputes."[19] Yet, Rykwert continued, "dispassionate criticism" (one could call it nonpartisan criticism) should not be the critic's ultimate goal: "I have always believed that the critic must be a fighter. To do so [critics] must […] have a clearly articulated notion of what they think society must expect of its builders, […] a distinct notion of what the architect may or may not be contributing to the common good."[20] In Rykwert's opinion, thus, the two faces of "engaged" criticism — regarding aesthetics, as a companion to architects — and politics — the preoccupation for the "common good" — must converge into a single figure of critic, in line with what had happened for a significant part of the history of architecture of the 19th and 20th centuries.

However, committed and politicized criticism reflect contextual conditions or, in other words, the *zeitgeist* of a particular moment of history. Kenneth Frampton has noted that architectural criticism specifically flourishes when it

16 See: Jean-Paul Bouillon (ed.), *La Critique d'art en France 1850-1900* (Saint-Étienne: CIEREC - Université de Saint-Étienne, 1989); Id., *La Promenade du critique influent, anthologie de la critique d'art en France 1850-1900* (Paris: Hazan, 1990).

17 Denys Riout, *Voir et prévoir (Notes sur une critique d'avant-garde dans les années 1880)* in Dominique Château (ed.), *À propos de "La critique"* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995), 289–304.

18 From the 1980s onwards, numerous studies have advanced new interpretations of the role played by different figures of committed or engaged critics; see for example: Sokratis Georgiadis, *Sigfried Giedion. Eine intellektuelle Biographie* (Zürich: gta/Ammann, 1989); Michela Rosso, *La storia utile, Patrimonio e modernità di John Summerson e Nikolaus Pevsner* (Turin: Edizioni di Comunità, 2001); Peter Draper (ed.), *Reassessing Nikolaus Pevsner* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003); Paolo Scrivano, *Storia di un'idea di architettura moderna. Henry-Russell Hitchcock e l'International Style* (Milan: Franco Angeli, 2001); Nigel Whiteley, *Reyner Banham: Historian of the Immediate Future* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2002).

19 Joseph Rykwert, "Ma la critica architettonica conta qualcosa?/Does Architecture Criticism Matter?", *Domus* 979 (April 2014), 3.

20 Ibid.

is tied to both a cultural milieu and a political commitment. Referring to the debate that reached its climax at the beginning of the 2000s, when it became dominated by "neo-pragmatist" tendencies, Frampton has underlined that a "post-critical" attitude developed thanks to the economic and political context of neoliberalism.[21] Frampton juxtaposes this context to the situation that characterized the years after the Second World War, evidencing the concomitance between the emergence of a substantially critical environment and the political and social conditions of the age of the Welfare State — a fertile "social-democratic" interregnum placed between the end of the war and the development of globalized capitalism.[22]

Among the questions that this volume of *Histories of Postwar Architecture* wants to address are: in which way do these definitions of "committed" and "politicized" criticism come close to or differ from the definition of "operative" criticism, in the various meanings that have been attributed to it since Tafuri's dismissal? What are the theoretical tools, the rhetorical constructions, and the intellectual and political references of "committed" and "politicized" criticism? Should the latter be necessarily bound to the author's belonging to a party or political group? What are their main ways of circulation (specialized periodicals, journals, targeted actions)? In which measure did "politicized" criticism influence architecture's historical narrative? And finally, what are the interlacements and the convergences between criticism's intellectual and artistic engagement and the political commitment?

The authors included in this volume consider the concept of committed and politicized criticism in different ways, exploring in the first place its boundaries with historiography, by bringing for example to light the question of the "embedded" historian. Some essays challenge the "common" understanding of commitment in the architectural debate, for instance exploring the background of an architectural magazine or unveiling the political dimension of a notion, such as the one of New Brutalism. Others, finally, examine the conditions that brought specific critical trends to emerge in peculiar political contexts.

While at first sight only partially centered on architectural criticism, Rixt Hoekstra's essay reflects upon the position of the "committed" architectural historian by embracing a broad definition of criticism. Hoekstra argues that the postwar historiography of De Stijl was defined by a change in the subject position of the historian as a critical actor: promoting contemporary architects, in fact, "operative historians" linked very often their object of study to contemporary practices. Hoekstra's text focuses on a period at the turn of the 1980s, when historians adopted a more distant and detached attitude toward De Stijl and other avant-garde movements. On his part, Marco Capponi undertakes a philological research over the first and second editions of Manfredo Tafuri's *Teorie*

21 Kenneth Frampton, "Introduction," *Les Cahiers de la recherche architecturale et urbaine* 24-25 (December 2009), 11–3, monographic issue "La critique en temps et lieux" edited by Kenneth Frampton and Hélène Jannière.

22 Kenneth Frampton, "Notes sur la réception critique de Le Corbusier en Grande-Bretagne, 1946-1972," ibid., 22–3.

e storia dell'architettura, a book that marked a key-moment in Tafuri's career, characterized by the apparent abandonment of committed criticism and architectural practice in favor of history. Delving into *Teorie e storia dell'architettura*'s supporting bibliography and its apparatus of citations, Capponi's essay demonstrates that Tafuri politicized his book *a posteriori*, in order to somewhat conform to the cultural context of Venice's school of architecture, where he was teaching at the time. Through an accurate bibliographic analysis and the study of the university lectures on which part of the text was based, Capponi discusses Tafuri's notions of history and operative criticism, particularly in relation to key publications of the 20th-century such as those by Giedion, Zevi and Leonardo Benevolo, all preceding *Teorie e storia dell'architettura*.

In his essay on the British journal *Architectural Design*, Steven Parnell explores an unusual aspect of criticism, largely overlooked by architectural historians. Adopting a biographical approach, Parnell uses the case of Monica Pidgeon's long career as the publication's editor to unveil the continuous overlapping between her inclinations and preferences and the journal's critical line, not rarely reflecting Pidgeon's network of personal connections. Parnell convincingly contends that "engaged" criticism often materialized in the pages of *Architectural Design* thanks to the presence in the periodical's editorial board of "technical" editors such as Theo Crosby, Kenneth Frampton, and Robin Middleton. The postwar English architectural debate is also the subject of Silvia Groaz's essay, which focuses on the political and ideological implications of New Brutalism. The author illustrates the complex genealogy of the term, which was not only tied to the use of a particular material or aesthetics, but also incorporated political values when it was for example utilized to oppose the New Empiricism advocated by most architects and planners of the London County Council. The text scrutinizes the opposition between New Brutalism and New Empiricism, which mostly reflected the positions of two political factions: on the one side, the exponents of the Marxist wing, who endorsed a privileged Swedish-English cultural connection and advocated for a "new national architecture with humanistic overtones"; on the other, the supporters of a more radical conception of urbanism, accused by its opponents of "social failure". Groaz's contribution unveils the shift of meaning to which the term New Brutalism was subjected throughout the years: when largely disseminated from the mid-1950s onwards, its common understanding prioritized aesthetic or architectural values, owing to its appropriation by high-profile figures of the British postwar debate such as Banham and Alison and Peter Smithson.

The relationship between criticism and political context is at the center of two other essays included in this volume, those by Guanghui Ding and Dijia Chen, both dedicated to China. Investigating the role played from 1980 to 1995 by academic and critic Zhaofen Zeng in editing the journal *Shìjiè Jiànzhú* (World Architecture), as well as his activity as contributor to the rival publication *Jiànzhúshī* (The Architect), Ding takes Zeng's actions as an instrument to assess the conditions of possibility reserved to architecture criticism in the

Chinese context of the 1980s. On her side, Dija Chen scrutinizes the critical discourse that emerged around the so-called "experimental architects" and that involved part of China's academic community during the early 2000s. Her essay evaluates the role that experimental architecture had in voicing criticism in the country's post-reform architectural production, but also in providing an alternative venue for a novel debate on the discipline. Both Ding and Chen's essays draw an accurate portrait of the Chinese context at a time when the latter experienced a massive "encounter" with global architectural culture.

Finally, the last two essays explore themes with a significant potential to enrich the discussion that this volume of *Histories of Postwar Architecture* intends to launch. Considering the events surrounding the 1988 competition for the German Historical Museum in Berlin and the role played by architect and university professor Max Bächer in promoting the project by Aldo Rossi, Frederike Lausch and Phoebus Panigyrakis analyze the discussions of the time over the "intrinsic" value of an architectural work and over the independence of aesthetics from politics. The question concerning the relation between architecture and politics, that Bächer had investigated in his university lectures, echoed the debate over architecture's disciplinary autonomy that had surfaced since the 1990s in Italian circles — and which involved, not surprisingly, the same Rossi. The case examined by Lausch and Panigyrakis is a good example of intersection between political and disciplinary debates, but also between different levels of competence and understanding of architecture. The latter subject is indeed at the center of Alessandro Benetti's essay, which considers architectural guides as a peculiar form of "non-professional criticism". Drawing on the analysis of the texts and the iconographic apparati of the publications issued by the Touring Club Italiano, which were devoted to small city centers (the so-called *centri minori*), Benetti argues that these books, written by prominent Italian scholars, led ostensibly to the realization of a product situated between high-culture publications and tourist guides: as such, they reached a wide public of amateurs while fitting into the Club's cultural agenda, meant to create consensus around the preservation and valorization of Italy's non-monumental heritage.

The essays collected in this volume offer a sufficiently vast array of examples of engaged and politicized criticism. They take into consideration different contextual conditions and backgrounds, encompassing disciplinary, political, or cultural levels, and linking them to the involved actors and theirs networks. Without doubt, they do not provide an overall panorama of committed criticism in historical terms, but they aspire to open a discussion on a subject too often taken for granted while not always thoroughly analyzed. Since much remains to be done, this volume of *Histories of Postwar Architecture* aims thus to offer a small contribution to a discussion that in large part is still in progress.