

Political Art and the Paradigm of Innovation

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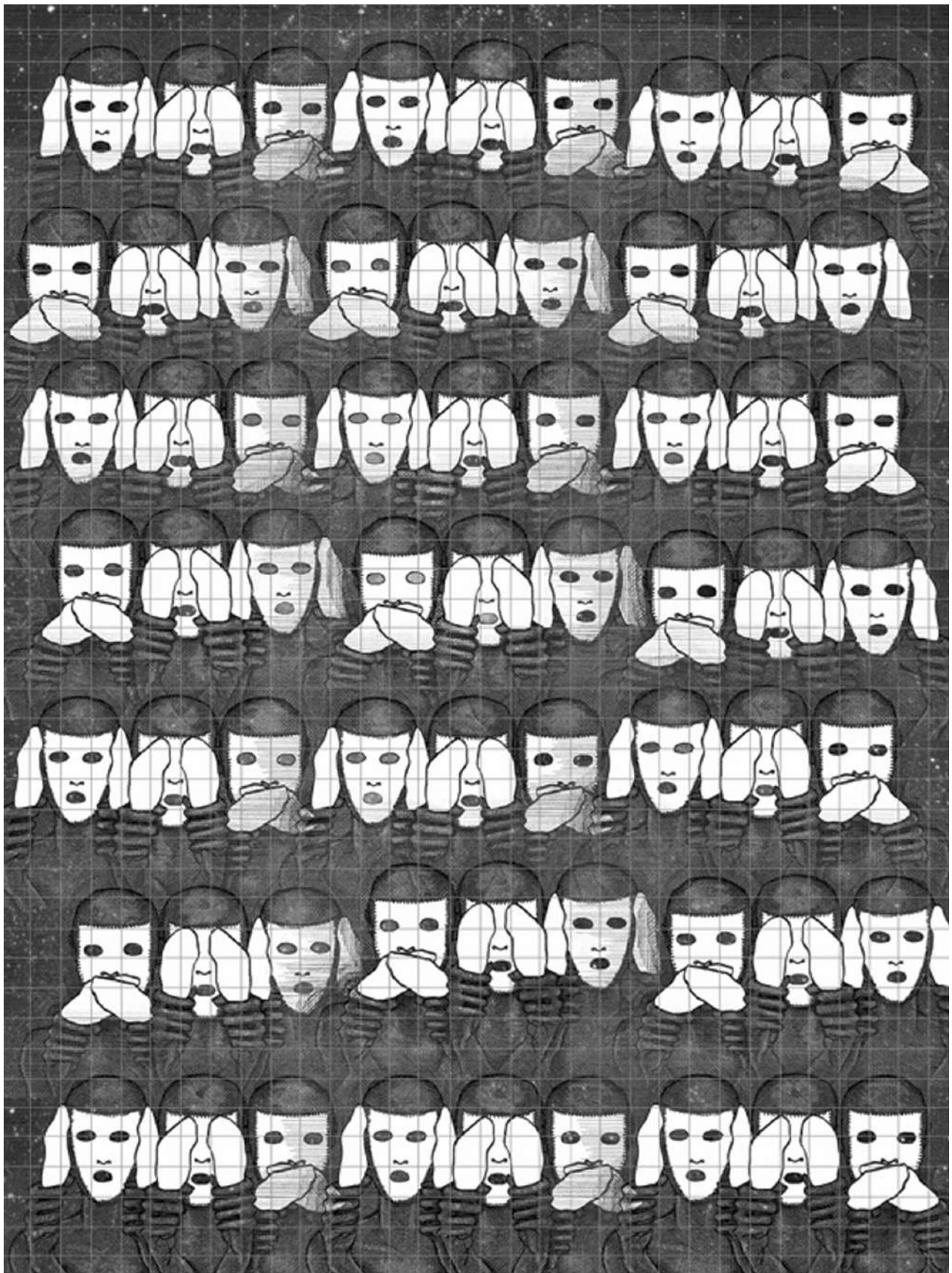
Post-modernism claimed that originality is no longer possible, and that the artist is merely a scavenger who rearranges prefabricated materials, images and ideas—call this the anti-originality thesis. This thesis was itself original, and therefore self-defeating. But quite aside from its self-contradiction, the anti-originality thesis was objectionable for several reasons. First, it rationalized the long-standing mainstream Euroethnic practice of using without attribution and exploiting for personal profit the creative products of marginalized cultures, while those marginalized cultures themselves continued to labor under conditions of obscurity and deprivation. Second, the creative products of marginalized cultures express meanings that can only be understood by understanding the culture in question. The anti-originality thesis decontextualized and resituated them in such a way as to discourage cross-cultural communication and reinforce mainstream tendencies to ignorance and self-congratulation. Third, the anti-originality thesis began to gain currency in the United States in the late 1980s—at the very moment when, as the result of the increasing popularity of the concept of ‘otherness’ bequeathed us by post-structuralist anthropology, the innovative contributions of artists from those marginalized cultures began to gain recognition. The anti-originality thesis enabled mainstream artists, who had risen to prominence on the basis of aesthetic innovation now clearly familiar from the work of formerly unacknowledged minority artists, to dismiss the value of originality in any case—thereby cementing the art-historical significance of the mainstream group while denying it to those on the margins. The anti-originality thesis thus served an urgent function at an important historical moment. It was an ideological fiction that provided an institutional bulwark against the marginalized outsiders who were beginning to storm the barricades.

A further shortcoming of the anti-originality thesis was the shallow conception of originality it presupposed. According to this conception, true originality does not depend on materials, images or ideas already present in the culture at large, but rather contributes entirely novel ones. It does not synthesize or reconfigure any such previously existing elements, but rather creates new ones from scratch—as though these were mutually exclusive alternatives; and as though any entirely novel entity could be cognized in the first place. In order to speak to us, a work of art must use languages we can recognize.

If works of art in any field really had to expunge all familiar images, ideas, media and materials in order to meet such criteria of originality, none of the major art historical figures we consensually recognize as original would pass the test. Should we then have gone back and re-evaluated whether Picasso made too great a use of African art to count as innovative according to this criterion? And if so, should we then have valorized Picasso’s cubism even more highly because of its unoriginality? And should we now valorize more highly works of art that are more derivative, and disparage works that are insufficiently derivative? These are some of the *reductio ad absurda* to which the anti-originality thesis leads.

Finally, the impotence of the anti-originality thesis was demonstrated by the long-standing art world practices of selecting, exhibiting, marketing and canonizing modern art. Regardless of conflicting opinions about quality, all parties to these practices converge on the essentials of how to bring work to the attention of a larger audience and how to keep it there. Whether the audience in question is the artist who first makes the work, the dealer who first shows it, the viewer who first sees it, the critic who first writes about it, the collector who first buys it, or the institution that first legitimates it, the language of innovation functions in the same way. It frames the work as ‘cutting edge,’ as something that, in some important respect, has not been done before: as breaking new ground, pushing the envelope, challenging received notions, framing the debate in a new way, rejecting cherished principles, violating conventional thinking, and so on. Most of us have been deploying these familiar clichés to suit our art professional promotional roles since the onset of industrialization. And sometimes they are even warranted by the work in question. For all of these reasons, it is very difficult to take the anti-originality thesis seriously, as original as it originally seemed to be.

Indeed, the promotional fervor with which the concept of originality is invoked to market and canonize modern art finds its parallel in the fervor with which the anti-originality thesis itself was marketed as original. The enthusiasm that greeted this novel thesis when it first appeared, the heat with which its advocates elaborated upon and proselytized about it, and the seriousness with which it was taken up in extended discussion—all were sound indicators of its originality. Then began the gradual process of dogmatic



Adrian Piper, *Avdiya* (2012). Custom-designed silk-screen wallpaper, dimensions variable. Collection and © Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation Berlin.

hardening by which this new idea became old—its canonization in the art-critical literature, the creation of academic chairs for its proponents, the generations of graduate students pressed into service to spread the gospel, the incorporation of this gospel into academic syllabi, and finally the new generations of graduate students who sought to meet the requirement of dissertation originality by calling the anti-originality thesis itself into question. This cyclical, essentially self-cannibalizing process—it's new, it's old, it's new because it's old, it's old because it's new, etc.—characterizes the historical shelf-life of the anti-originality thesis as well as that of modern art.

But this process is not confined to art or academia. It typifies a culture that more generally perpetuates itself by creating desires for 'new and improved' commodities, consuming them, digesting them, spitting them out, and moving on to the next ones—i.e. the culture of unrestrained free-market capitalism. The following observations are based in my experience of American culture and politics. But to the extent that you permit the globalization of American culture to invade your own, you may find them relevant there as well.

The culture of unrestrained free-market capitalism feeds on the shared and foundational experience of incompleteness, inferiority—of generalized insufficiency, or *want*. The experience of generalized want is created by media fabrications of a fantasy world of perpetual happiness that sharply contrasts with our complex and often painful social reality, plus the promise that this fantasy world can be realized through the acquisition of those material goods that serve as props within it. For those who have the wealth to acquire such props, this promise is broken on a daily basis, and the hollow dissatisfaction at the core of perpetual acquisition is a constant reminder that something is missing. Unfortunately, this dissatisfaction only rarely leads to the interrogation of the basic premise of the fantasy itself—i.e. that the acquisition of material props can realize it in the first place. Usually the conclusion is, rather, that more props are needed to do the trick.

This is the function of the globalized advertainment industry. Based in the American myth of acquisition and consumption, it offers tantalizing desire-satisfaction events as palliatives to the agonies of conscience caused by America's historical crimes against humanity and their present consequences. And it is nourished internationally by comparable agonies in other countries: the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, of the British Empire, the Second World War in Germany and Japan, the Soviet regime in Russia, the Cultural Revolution in China, to name only a few. The globalized advertainment industry exploits our shared need to escape from the morally unbearable present of those consequences, by producing 'new and improved' goods and services that deaden their pain and divert our attention. And it expends enormous

resources convincing us to want them. That is, the advertainment industry creates interminable and insatiable desire for the new that narcotizes the ugly realities and moral self-dislike inherited from our past atrocities; it promises an end to that self-dislike in repetitive infusions of desire-satisfaction. The enduring themes of originality and innovation that characterize the discourse of modern art—indeed, contemporary culture more generally—is merely one example of that dynamic.

However, as for other such examples, there are limits on the extent of acceptable innovation in modern art. I have already suggested that no art object can be original in every respect, if it hopes to gain cognitive recognition from its viewers. A concrete particular that is not recognizable relative to the pre-existing concepts and categories by which we make sense of experience can form no part of that experience. But the limits of acceptability are much narrower than this. Unrestrained free-market capitalism depends on the rhetoric of innovation to drive consumption of the objects, events and services that perpetuate it. To the extent that a work of art undermines such consumption itself, it sacrifices acceptability, approval and status within that economy—no matter how innovative it may be in other respects—and is marginalized accordingly.

A work of art can innovate in many ways that thus conflict with the foundations of unrestrained free-market capitalism. Here are a few of them, in no particular order: First, it can critique irrationally unequal distributions of power and resources that impede the level playing field that democratic social institutions theoretically presuppose. Art that critiques racism, sexism, homophobia, anti-Semitism and other forms of xenophobia would exemplify such work. Second, it can interrogate the commodity production that is the currency of unrestrained free-market capitalism. Art that, through its form or its content calls into question the value of material embodiment, of refined techniques of production or of the use of expensive materials would exemplify such work. Third, it can call attention to the exchange relations among agents that drive an unrestrained free-market economy. Art that examines the transactions between artist and critic, dealer and collector, art and exhibition venue, promotional visibility and sales or profitability and institutional canonization would exemplify such work. Fourth, it can subvert the act or process of consumption itself. Art that disintegrates, or rots, or self-destructs, or evaporates after a fixed period of time, or that, through viewer participation, continually alters and expands its own form, or that elicits distancing, or self-critique, or intellectual reflection, or anger, or disgust rather than desire, or that rejects materiality thwarts the normal process of commodity consumption that links such objects with desire-satisfaction. Fifth, it can call into question the fundamental values of consumption. Art that satirizes desire or sexuality or wealth or technology, or that calls attention to alterna-

tive value systems that oppose or reject these, or that requires criteria of aesthetic evaluation that are incompatible with them, or that invokes utopian social ideals of fairness and equality would exemplify such work.

These brief descriptions identify some of the kinds of work we typically call ‘avant-garde,’ or ‘cutting edge.’ They are only a few of the ways in which a work of art can come into conflict with the conditions required by the smooth functioning of an unrestrained free-market economy. Such works have in common a genesis in culturally transgressive ideas or concepts that drive artists to actualize them, despite their incompatibility with the norms and ideology of capitalism. By resisting conformity to the social and economic status quo, they function primarily as paradigms of artistic self-expression. Thus two concepts—avant-garde or cutting-edge art on the one hand, and self-expression on the other—are linked in art that defies the cultural conventions of unrestrained free-market capitalism, by expressing a part of the self that exists beyond the limiting boundaries of desire. Cutting-edge paradigms of self-expression, in turn, frustrate the conventional economic function of art as a high-end currency of exchange in an unrestrained free market.

This kind of art thus embodies a tension between two central ideas assumed to be entwined in most modern democracies: free expression and free-market consumption. Capitalism typically defends free-market consumption as the most meaningful exercise of free expression in a modern democracy: to quote a particularly compelling recent ad, ‘I want to break free-e-e!’—while drinking Coke. In this paradigm, freedom of expression equals freedom to consume, to satisfy desire. Hence freedom of the self, in this narrative, is in fact equivalent to enslavement by desire; and non-equivalent to autonomous self-regulation. Rather than being moved by principled internal dispositions that define and structure the self independently of the external influences on it, the self under unrestrained free-market capitalism is driven by its pursuit of objects external to it. Rather than controlling its desires and deferring their gratification in light of such principles, the self is controlled and defined by its desires, and so is at the mercy of the external stimuli that drive it. Unrestrained free-market consumption thus transforms the self into a marionette jerked here and there by the strings that attach it to external sources of self-gratification. Unrestrained free-market capitalism’s version of freedom of expression thus presupposes what Kant would call a heteronymous self that is defined by the external objects it appropriates and digests. This is precisely the opposite of the originality and innovation that unrestrained free-market capitalism claims to nurture. Commodities that actually satisfy these desiderata would thus seem to stunt their growth in those who consume them.

Cutting-edge art of the kind described earlier demonstrates that there is no necessary connection between freedom of expression and free-market consumption. The two are antithetical where freedom of expression transgresses the habitual desires that market consumption inculcates. Such work serves to remind us that there are other capacities within the self—curiosity, wonder, intellect, reason, self-awareness, for example—and may even awaken those capacities within some viewers. By stimulating alternative capacities within the self and eliciting alternative responses that outcompete the demands of desire, such work also may inspire new possibilities of creative self-expression in its viewers. If it can be dismissed by the incurious with the comment that ‘I could do that if I tried,’ it can also be embraced by the curious with exactly the same thought.

To the extent that such work frustrates market exchange and consumption, it tends to exist at the margins of an unrestrained free-market economy, if at all. And it receives less of the financial support or institutional legitimation than does work which functions more smoothly within the constraints of free-market capitalism. It denies such work an audience at any or all levels of entry into the nerve centre of contemporary art: dealers decline to make studio visits to see it, or decline to show it on grounds of its unmarketability; or, should the work pass that hurdle, critics, mindful of the conservative publishing interests that ultimately ensure their own marketability, decline to write about it; or, should the work pass that hurdle, curators, mindful of the conservative administrative interests that ultimately determine museum policy (including staff hiring), decline to accord it the stamp of institutional canonization; or, should the work pass that hurdle, conservative institutions and collectors, mindful of the contradiction to their own values such work expresses, decline to purchase it. In direct proportion to the threat to such values that this type of cutting-edge art represents, it is immediately or gradually eliminated from public awareness and from the historical record by those conservative capitalist interests themselves. Cutting-edge art thereby exposes the ideological deception by which unrestrained capitalism claims the mantle of freedom for purposes of self-legitimation. Unrestrained free-market capitalism in fact restricts quite narrowly the freedom to express oneself in works of art that subvert the market transactions through which such works are supposed to be consumed.

By excluding from institutional legitimation those works of art that thus call into question the foundations of this system, the system of free-market capitalism itself thereby ensures a permanent supply of innovative but perpetually marginalized art works that do, in fact, ‘break new ground,’ ‘push the envelope,’ ‘challenge received notions,’ ‘frame the debate in a new way,’ ‘reject cherished principles’ or ‘violate conventional thinking’—to the detriment of their

creators' livelihoods. Typically, these judgements are applied approvingly to those innovations that respect the highly circumscribed limits of unrestrained free-market capitalism: the rhetoric of the margin is most effectively manipulated by those most firmly ensconced at the center. But they are withheld from innovations that actually do most strongly interrogate or subvert market forces. Instead, such art typically receives either heavy blasts of unfocused hostility, or little if any recognition at all. Because such work destabilizes the power relations constitutive of unrestrained free-market capitalism, I shall bring all of it under the rubric of *explicitly political art*.

By contrast, *implicitly political art* is often preoccupied with abstraction, or pure form, or perception, or beauty. Its content avoids topical, politically divisive subject matter; and its form extends and celebrates accepted materials, techniques and modes of production. It may serve to inspire or delight us, or provide an escape or asylum from the painful social realities that surround us. As such, implicitly political art is no less culturally necessary, significant or valuable than explicitly political art. A healthy and well-functioning society makes room for both. Most artists who produce implicitly political art are extremely fortunate to have the luxury of an inner, creative sanctuary in which the drive to produce such work can be nurtured. They are fortunate to be spared the necessity of grappling consciously and always, at all levels of their being, with the urgent social problems that often drive explicitly political art. Most producers of implicitly political art have reason to be grateful for the creative solace from such problems they are privileged to enjoy.

However, some who produce implicitly political art do not escape such problems, but rather are ensnared by them. Motivated by self-censorship, and by the strategic understanding that making explicitly political art lessens the chances and the magnitude of professional success, this kind of implicitly political art is an expression of imprisonment within the bounds of political conflict, rather than an escape from it. These artists make a reasoned decision that voluntarily cramping their own scope of self-expression and confining their investigations within free-market capitalist conventions is well worth the trade-off in professional success. They thereby sacrifice freedom of expression for the material rewards of institutional legitimacy. They knowingly subordinate the self-expressive function of their work to its function as a currency of market exchange, and, like artists and writers in the former eastern European countries under Communism, they exchange clarity for 'subtlety,' forthrightness for 'understatement,' and political protest for 'irony.' The authoritarian extremes of capitalism and socialism thus dovetail in the artistic evasions and self-protective camouflage they force professionally ambitious artists to adopt.

Regardless of the background determinants of implicitly political art, it qualifies as political because—like all events, actions and choices embedded in a social context—it has political preconditions and political consequences. Whatever its other benefits—and there are many—implicitly political art reinforces and exploits the conditions required by unrestrained free-market capitalism. Implicitly political art tacitly endorses the status quo by taking advantage of it, presupposing it, and declining to interrogate it. This would include art that purports to contain no political content, or contains political content so masked and subdued under layers of irony, esoteric allusions and insider jokes that it is perceptually invisible; or art that requires the expensive and sophisticated production techniques of any high-end commodity; or that diverts the viewer's attention away from her own compromised location within the matrix of power relations that constitute a free-market economy; or that celebrates or reinforces the addictive habits of commodity consumption and desire-satisfaction themselves. A healthy market economy, embedded within the constraints of a stable and well-functioning democracy, would accommodate both art that celebrates it and art that interrogates it.

Obviously all of these different characteristics identify a multi-dimensional sliding scale of degrees according to which a work of art may be explicitly or implicitly political. No work of art is well served by all-or-nothing judgements at either extreme, and to call a work either implicitly or explicitly political is not to pass judgement on its quality or value. Nevertheless, these two possibilities, together with the continuum of degrees between them, are exhaustive. The concept of 'non-political art'—i.e. art that is political neither in its content, nor its form, nor its social or economic presuppositions, is another ideological fiction of unrestrained free-market capitalism that has been used for propaganda purposes just as effectively as explicitly political art has.

To see why explicitly political art is systematically marginalized in an unrestrained free-market capitalist art world, consider the instrumentalizing function that transforms all objects, events and relationships into tools of desire-satisfaction in an unrestrained free-market economy more generally. This function consists in a disposition to view all such objects, events and relationships as potential instruments of personal profit, and to appraise and rank them accordingly. Here the archetypal question is, 'How much mileage can I get out of this?' The question can be posed of any object, event, relationship or condition. It is in essence a question as to how the maximum possible personal profit, i.e. satisfaction of personal desire, can be wrung from it. Unrestrained free-market capitalism thus subordinates all such states of affairs to the satisfaction of personal desire. I describe it as *unrestrained* because it

imposes no constraints of custom, policy or principle on the pursuit of desire-satisfaction.

For among the states of affairs thus subordinated are, of course, political relationships. After all, the 'free' in 'free-market' refers to a market unregulated and unrestrained by government interference. Advocates of free-market capitalism like to claim that government interference is unnecessary to a society in which all consumers are rational profit-seekers whose patterns of individual consumption conduce to the well-being of all. But this sunny view ignores the instrumentalizing function that defines unrestrained free-market capitalism, which encourages forming temporary alliances and monopolies that maximize profit by reducing competition. It also encourages unethical free riding when this is an effective means to the same end. It now seems clear that the combination of monopoly with free rider corporate practices is a lethal one that demands governmental regulation rather than refutes the need for it; and that such monopolies are incapable of policing themselves.

However, the drive for personal profit and desire-satisfaction is at odds with political regulation designed to secure the stability of all transactions within a society. Social stability requires three basic conditions. First, it requires mutual trust, and so an embedded convention of honoring contracts, or promise-keeping. Second, it requires a fair distribution of economic resources, so as to minimize conflict over those resources. These two conditions, in turn, require a third: an enforcement mechanism that distributes rewards for honoring contracts and economic fairness, and punishments for violating them. The machinery of government—of legislation, administration and adjudication—is predicated on these basic social requirements.

In a healthy and well-functioning society, individual odysseys of desire-satisfaction are constrained by these requirements. Those that conflict with them are systematically discouraged by the society's entrenched customs, as well as by its penal system. In such a society, government functions not only as a constraint but also as a counterweight to the pull of uncontrolled profit-seeking. Such a government consistently protects the rights of free speech when these are in jeopardy. It consistently inflicts punishments for criminal behavior. It passes and consistently enforces policies, procedures and regulations that ensure fairness in all contractual transactions, even where these policies may thwart individual advantage. And it consistently advocates on behalf of the powerless, in order that their voices and their claims receive the same attention as those of the powerful or eloquent. However, we have already seen that in an unregulated free-market capitalist society, government performs none of these functions consistently because it is, in reality, a subordinate instrument

of capital accumulation that acts only when and where it serves corporate interests to allow this.

A society driven by unregulated free-market capitalism is unhealthy and dysfunctional because in it, the basic structural requirement of social stability itself is subordinated to individual odysseys of desire-satisfaction, rather than the other way around. Unregulated free-market capitalism satisfies the conditions of social stability—i.e. trust and fairness—only to the extent that these are compatible with the accumulation of personal instruments of desire-satisfaction. Thus contracts are honored only if it is profitable to do so, but violated if this would be more cost-effective. Resources are distributed fairly only when inequitable but self-aggrandizing distributions would be too costly—for example, when the risk of public disclosure, potential social disruption, expensive litigation, falling revenues or stock prices, a tarnished reputation and the like would be too high. More generally, in an unregulated capitalist society, social stability is a worthwhile investment only to the extent that one's gated and guarded residential community cannot be sufficiently fortified against the danger of riots outside it; or to the extent that financial resources cannot be protected in anonymous off-shore bank accounts.

However, unregulated free-market capitalism does not merely subordinate transactional stability to maximizing personal desire-satisfaction at the tactical level. It ensures the compliance of those whose job it is to secure social stability itself—i.e. the legislative, executive and judicial branches of government—by purchasing their allegiance to personal profitability instead. By rewarding government officials with gifts, bribes, campaign contributions, personal favours, capital resources, high-status official appointments and high-paying jobs in the private sector, corporations condition those officials to reciprocate by creating and implementing public policies that are advantageous to corporate goals. In a society overtaken entirely by unregulated free-market capitalism, what may look from the outside—and, indeed, even to a naïve insider—like a serendipitous partnership between business and government is in fact a corporate business relationship between an employer and the government officials employed to protect and promote the corporation's best interests. Government is thereby similarly instrumentalized as a tool by which the powerful may maximize desire-satisfaction and personal profit.

For example, the American Republican party enacted a hostile takeover of the 2000 Presidential election through its five corporate employees on the Supreme Court. Their decision to hand the Presidency to a candidate who had lost the popular vote flaunted their power in the face of a politically disabled electorate, and irreparably defiled the legitimacy and judicial authority of the Supreme Court itself. These five Supreme Court Justices were more than

willing to trade their personal integrity, moral authority, the dignity of their office and the very idea of a democratically elected President for personal gain. Once these salaried rewards of capital are established conventions of governance, the desire for justice or a commitment to the ideals of democracy and freedom become irrelevant to the function of political office. Corporate profit and political profit become mutually reinforcing variants on the same theme.

And once the bond of trust between a citizenry and its government is decisively broken by this kind of corruption, that government can no longer motivate the democratic participation of its citizenry, because its claims to embody democratic values and represent fairly its citizens' best interests are no longer credible. However, at this stage such a government does not need the democratic participation of its citizenry to survive. On the contrary: its survival is secured by the same corporate profits it is now reconfigured to protect, and the democratic participation of its citizenry is little more than an irritant and an obstacle to that goal. The society's best interests that government now cynically purports to represent in staged and scripted public relations events are at best an afterthought.

Then the best hope for such a citizenry is simply to wait for the inevitable squabbles over power and resources to develop into wars between the major players in business and government, and wait for them to turn back to the citizenry to forge alliances that can leverage their respective positions relative to their enemies. But an informed and sophisticated citizenry in such a society will not mistake such transient, tactical alliances of power for the relations of fair representation that identify a true democracy. Nor will it depend on that government to represent fairly citizens' best interests where they can offer government no incentives of power or profit to do so. So, for example, a community or subculture that is powerful neither in numbers nor in capital resources should not expect acts of magnanimity from its elected representatives, even where these are required by considerations of fairness. In unregulated free-market capitalism, political representation is just another instrument for maximizing personal profit, and is as transient and unstable as the desires that profit satisfies. Talk of fairness is cause for mockery.

Now we can see more easily why, in a society driven by unregulated free-market capitalism, explicitly political art that undermines its foundations is relegated to the margins, while implicitly political art that depends on and reinforces those foundations is rewarded. Those of us in whom the acculturated commitment to democracy runs deep may naturally think that free exchange in Mill's marketplace of ideas is far more essential to a well-functioning democracy than unregulated exchange in the marketplace of goods and

services; and therefore that artistic expression is a paradigm of democracy rather than of consumption. However, in an unregulated free-market society, expression itself is nothing more than a subordinate instrument of profit and desire-satisfaction. Speech, including artistic production, is a tool for achieving a desired end, whether or not its content refers to any matter of fact. A person who says what he thinks you want to hear rather than what he believes; or makes statements that are at odds with her actions; or deliberately misrepresents policies or matters of political fact; or uses speech to threaten, intimidate or deceive, or fill valuable air time, or placate his constituents or 'spin' a publicity disaster is a familiar spectacle in American political life, as well as outside it.

Only the gullible take such instrumentalized speech seriously. An audience that recognizes such speech as the tool of manipulation and self-aggrandizement it is simply tunes out. A public figure who engages in instrumentalized speech, knowing that no one believes it, knowingly uses such speech as a cynical and arrogant display of force that taunts its audiences with its inability to fight back; and debases it by the force-feeding of lies. Thus, reminding a disenfranchized citizenry of its powerlessness to set rational and honest terms of public dialogue is the demoralizing role of an advertainment media industry under unregulated capitalism.

Under these circumstances, cutting-edge artistic self-expression can find no protection because it violates the instrumentalization of speech on which unregulated capitalism feeds. On the contrary: such self-expression is a threat to its smooth functioning that must be marginalized and disabled as efficiently as possible; and so is, under these circumstances, a form of self-endangerment, indeed career suicide, for its creator. Where government is merely an instrument of capital accumulation, there can be no genuine alternative economic support system to sustain and encourage works of art that contribute to public dialogue by interrogating, criticizing or undermining the political status quo in the ways earlier described. There can be no deeply embedded social arrangements relative to which interrogation, criticism or the presentation of alternatives can be publicly acknowledged as valuable; and no social framework within which these values can find consistent and concerted defence. That is, such a society has no room for a 'loyal opposition'—of the sort that the BBC, for example, frequently provides to the British government—and no incentive to supply the basic social preconditions in which art as a paradigm of self-expression can flourish. All it can be—all it is permitted to be—is an instrumental, high-end currency of market transaction.

Consider an actual case. In the 1990s in the United States, the Philip Morris corporation (now renamed Altria) backed

both reactionary politicians who opposed governmental funding for avant-garde art, and also artists and major art institutions that exhibited it. On the surface, it seemed inconsistent to support both political representatives such as Senator Jesse Helms who opposed such work on the one hand, and also art institutions that encouraged it on the other. But at a deeper level there was no inconsistency. Since Philip Morris sells drug addiction and death for profit, it was and remains clearly very vulnerable to political and moral criticism. And, as both Philip Morris and Senator Jesse Helms were fully aware, avant-garde art can be an extremely powerful and potent voice of moral criticism and political protest. So it was in Philip Morris's interests to control the content of such art, to restrict it to the critically innocuous and politically inoffensive. It attempted to accomplish this, first, by helping Senator Helms eliminate public funding for avant-garde art. Second, Philip Morris simultaneously established itself as the major source of private corporate funding in the arts. Thus, in essence, artworks and exhibitions could receive funding either from Philip Morris and corporations like it, or not at all.

By refusing to fund explicitly political art that criticized, protested or undermined its corporate interests, and choking off alternative sources of funding in the public sector, Philip Morris successfully discouraged the making, exhibiting and performance of such work. Having already bought the complicity of elected representatives in eliminating government support for works of contemporary art, it then bought the silence both of artists who wanted those professional opportunities, and also of the art institutions that otherwise would have offered them. Both censored themselves, and subordinated contemporary art to the demands of unregulated free-market capitalism, by producing and exhibiting commodities it could easily digest.

This example illustrates the truism that in a society in which government is a tool of business interests, we can hardly expect it to be a beacon of democracy in the arts. In such a society, adherence to the ideology of unregulated free-market capitalism is a primary objective of content programming in the advertainment industry, as well as of

acculturation throughout the society more generally. Such ideological adherence is strictly incompatible with an unconditional commitment to freedom of expression. So, far from being celebrated as an expression of the democratic exchange of ideas, artwork that interrogates, criticizes or offers alternatives is discouraged by the withholding of political as well as financial support. Through such negative reinforcement consistently applied, the scope of thought and imagination themselves are diminished to minor variations on the actual—at the same time that desire, consumption and impulse shopping are magnified into fantasy retreats from it; and we gradually lose the capacity to conceive a world in which our lives, our experiences and our selves can be any better or any different than they are now. This is how a purportedly democratic form of government can be complicit in the suppression of reason when this conflicts with the profit motive.

Now one very great achievement of explicitly political art is to demonstrate, at a concrete perceptual level, what alternatives to the status quo actually look like. That is why it often makes its viewers so viscerally uncomfortable. Explicitly political art does not always, or necessarily, present its viewers with alternatives to the status quo that are genuine improvements on it: explicitly political art can be politically reactionary as well. Nevertheless, some explicitly political art does give form and reality to dreams of betterment—of more humane attitudes towards others who are different, more considerate treatment of natural resources and materials, more judicious forms of social organization, or more reflective and sophisticated approaches to our own psychological dispositions—and may stand as a back-handed reproach to the excesses of unregulated free-market capitalism for this reason alone. Seen from within the framework of such a society, explicitly political art may well seem to push the envelope a bit too far; to violate so many cherished assumptions and break so much new ground that the ground itself may seem to tremble beneath our feet. In these cases, explicitly political art may well transgress currently acceptable norms of innovation. But it does not violate the demands of human progress.

From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique

Andrea Fraser

Nearly forty years after their first appearance, the practices now associated with “institutional critique” have for many come to seem, well, institutionalized. In the Spring of 2005, for example, Daniel Buren returned with a major installation to the Guggenheim Museum (which famously censored both his and Hans Haacke’s work in 1971); Buren and Olafur Eliasson discussed the problem of “the institution” in the pages of *Artforum*; and the LA County Museum of Art hosted a conference called “Institutional Critique and After.” More symposia planned for the Getty and the College Art Association’s annual conference, along with a special issue of *Texte zur Kunst*, may very well see the further reduction of institutional critique to its acronym: IC. Ick.

In the context of museum exhibitions and art history symposia such as these, one increasingly finds institutional critique accorded the unquestioning respect often granted artistic phenomena that have achieved a certain historical status. That recognition, however, quickly becomes an occasion to dismiss the critical claims associated with it, as resentment of its perceived exclusivity and high-handedness rushes to the surface. How can artists who have become art-historical institutions themselves claim to critique the institution of art? Michael Kimmelman provided a ready example of such skepticism in his critical *New York Times* review of Buren’s Guggenheim show. While the “critique of the institution of the museum” and the “commodity status of art” were “counterestablishment ideas when, like Mr. Buren, they emerged forty or so years ago,” Kimmelman contends, Buren is now an “official artist of France, a role that does not seem to trouble some of his once-radical fans. Nor, apparently, does the fact that his brand of institutional analysis ... invariably depends on the largesse of institutions like the Guggenheim.” Kimmelman goes on to compare Buren unfavorably to Christo and Jeanne-Claude, who “operate, for the most part, outside traditional institutions, with fiscal independence, in a public sphere beyond the legislative control of art experts.”¹

Further doubts about the historic and present-day efficacy of institutional critique arise with laments over how bad things have become in an art world in which the Museum of Modern Art opens its new temporary exhibition galleries with a corporate collection, and art hedge funds sell shares of single paintings. In these discussions, one finds a certain

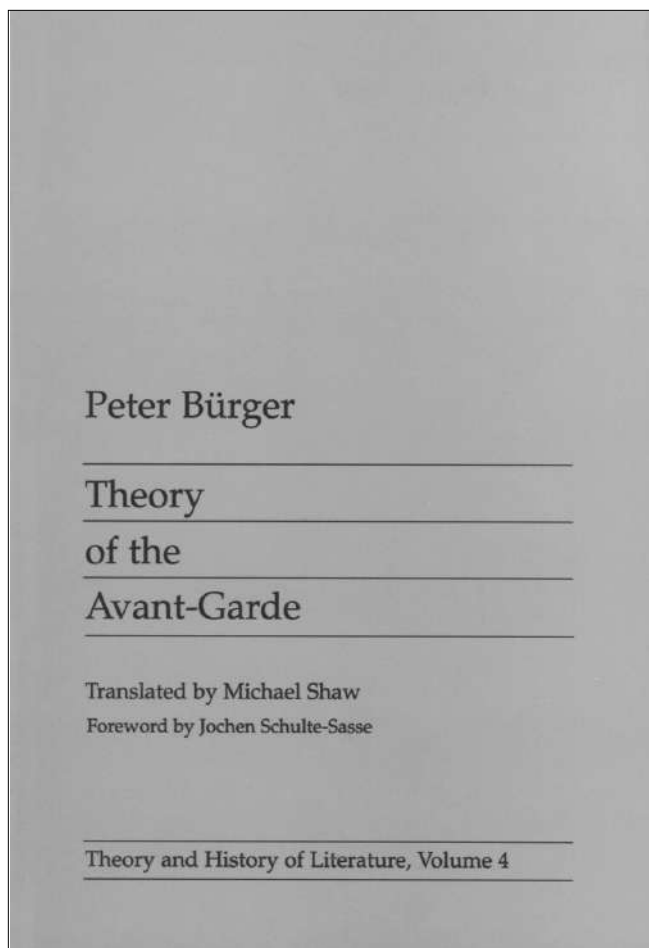
nostalgia for institutional critique as a now-anachronistic artifact of an era before the corporate mega-museum and the 24/7 global art market, a time when artists could still conceivably take up a critical position against or outside the institution. Today, the argument goes, there no longer is an outside. How, then, can we imagine, much less accomplish, a critique of art institutions when museum and market have grown into an all-encompassing apparatus of cultural reification? Now, when we need it most, institutional critique is dead, a victim of its own success or failure, swallowed up by the institution it stood against.

But assessments of the institutionalization of institutional critique and charges of its obsolescence in an era of mega-museums and global markets founders on a basic misconception of what institutional critique is, at least in light of the practices that have come to define it. They necessitate a reexamination of its history and aims, and a restatement of its urgent stakes in the present.

I recently discovered that none of the half-dozen people often considered the “founders” of “institutional critique” claim to use the term. I first used it in print in a 1985 essay on Louise Lawler, “In and Out of Place,” when I ran off the now-familiar list of Michael Asher, Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, and Hans Haacke, adding that, “while very different, all these artists engage(d) in institutional critique.”²

I probably first encountered that list of names coupled with the term “institution” in Benjamin H. D. Buchloh’s 1982 essay “Allegorical Procedures,” where he describes “Buren’s and Asher’s analysis of the historical place and function of aesthetic constructs within institutions, or Haacke’s and Broodthaers’ operations revealing the material conditions of those institutions as ideological.”³ The essay continues with references to “institutionalized language,” “institutional frameworks,” “institutional exhibition topics,” and describes one of the “essential features of Modernism” as the “impulse to criticize itself from within, to question its institutionalization.” But the term “institutional critique” never appears.

By 1985, I had also read Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, which was published in Germany in 1974 and finally appeared in English translation in 1984. One of Bürger’s



Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 1974. English edition by University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

central theses is that “with the historical avant-garde movements, the social subsystem that is art enters the stage of self-criticism. Dadaism ... no longer criticizes schools that preceded it, but criticizes art as an institution, and the course its development took in bourgeois society.”⁴

Having studied with Buchloh as well as Craig Owens, who edited my essay on Lawler, I think it's quite possible that one of them let “institutional critique” slip out. It's also possible that their students in the mid-80s at the School of Visual Arts and the Whitney Independent Study Program (where Hans Haacke and Martha Rosler also lectured)—including Gregg Bordowitz, Joshua Decker, Mark Dion, and me—just started using the terms as shorthand for “the critique of institutions” in our after-class debates. Not having found an earlier published appearance of the term, it is curious to consider that the established canon we thought we were receiving may have just been forming at the time. It could even be that our very reception of ten- or fifteen-year-old works, printed texts, and tardy translations (by the likes of Douglas Crimp, Asher, Buren, Haacke, Rosler, Buchloh, and Bürger), and our perception of those works and texts as canonical, was a central moment in the process of institutional critique's so-called institutionalization. And so I find myself enmeshed in the contradictions and com-

plicities, ambitions and ambivalence that institutional critique is often accused of, caught between the self-flattering possibility that I was the first person to put the term in print, and the critically shameful prospect of having played a role in the reduction of certain radical practices to a pithy catch-phrase, packaged for co-optation.

If, indeed, the term “institutional critique” emerged as shorthand for “the critique of institutions,” today that catchphrase has been even further reduced by restrictive interpretations of its constituent parts: “institution” and “critique.” The practice of institutional critique is generally defined by its apparent objects: “the institution,” which is, in turn, taken to refer primarily to established, organized sites for the presentation of art. As the flyer for the symposium at LACMA put it, institutional critique is art that exposes “the structures and logic of museums and art galleries.” “Critique” appears even less specific than “institution,” vacillating between a rather timid “exposing,” “reflecting,” or “revealing,” on the one hand, and visions of the revolutionary overthrow of the existing museological order on the other, with the institutional critic as a guerrilla fighter engaging in acts of subversion and sabotage, breaking through walls and floors and doors, provoking censorship, bringing down the powers that be. In either case, “art” and “artist” generally figure as antagonistically opposed to an “institution” that incorporates, co-opts, commodifies, and otherwise misappropriates once-radical—and institutionalized—practices.

These representations can admittedly be found in the texts of critics associated with institutional critique. However, the idea that institutional critique opposes art to institution, or supposes that radical artistic practices can or ever did exist outside of the institution of art before being “institutionalized” by museums, is contradicted at every turn by the writings and work of Asher, Broodthaers, Buren, and Haacke. From Broodthaers' announcement of his first gallery exhibition in 1964—which he begins by confiding that “the idea of inventing something insincere finally crossed my mind” and then informing us that his dealer will “take thirty percent”—the critique of the apparatus that distributes, presents, and collects art has been inseparable from a critique of artistic practice itself.⁵ As Buren put it in “The Function of the Museum” in 1970, if “the Museum makes its ‘mark,’ imposes its ‘frame’ ... on everything that is exhibited in it, in a deep and indelible way,” it does so easily because “everything that the Museum shows is only considered and produced in view of being in it.”⁶ In “The Function of the Studio” from the following year, he couldn't be more clear, arguing that the “analysis of the art system must inevitably be carried on” by investigating both the studio and the museum “as customs, the ossifying customs of art.”⁷

Indeed, the critique most consistently in evidence in the post-studio work of Buren and Asher is aimed at artistic

practice itself (a point that may not have been lost on other artists in the Sixth Guggenheim International Exhibition, since it was they, not the museum officials or trustees, who demanded the removal of Buren's work in 1971). As their writings make clear, the institutionalization of art in museums or its commodification in galleries cannot be conceived of as the co-optation or misappropriation of studio art, whose portable form predestines it to a life of circulation and exchange, market and museological incorporation. Their rigorously site-specific interventions developed as a means not only to reflect on these and other institutional conditions but also to resist the very forms of appropriation on which they reflect. As transitory, these works further acknowledge the historical specificity of any critical interventions, whose effectiveness will always be limited to a particular time and place. Broodthaers, however, was the supreme master of performing critical obsolescence in his gestures of melancholic complicity. Just three years after founding the *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* in his Brussels studio in 1968, he put his "museum fiction" up for sale, "for reasons of bankruptcy," in a prospectus that served as a wrapper for the catalogue of the Cologne Art Fair—with a limited edition sold through Galerie Michael Werner. Finally, the most explicit statement of the elemental role of artists in the institution of art may have been made by Haacke: "Artists," he wrote in 1974, "as much as their supporters and their enemies, no matter of what ideological coloration, are unwitting partners ... They participate jointly in the maintenance and/or development of the ideological make-up of their society. They work within that frame, set the frame and are being framed."⁸

From 1969 on, a conception of the "institution of art" begins to emerge that includes not just the museum, nor even only the sites of production, distribution, and reception of art, but the entire field of art as a social universe. In the works of artists associated with institutional critique, it came to encompass all the sites in which art is shown—from museums and galleries to corporate offices and collectors' homes, and even public space when art is installed there. It also includes the sites of the production of art, studio as well as office, and the sites of the production of art discourse: art magazines, catalogues, art columns in the popular press, symposia, and lectures. And it also includes the sites of the production of the producers of art and art discourse: studio art, art history and, now, curatorial studies programs. And finally, as Rosler put it in the title of her seminal 1979 essay, it also includes all the "lookers, buyers, dealers and makers" themselves.

This conception of "institution" can be seen most clearly in the work of Haacke, who came to institutional critique through a turn from physical and environmental systems in the 1960s to social systems, starting with his gallery-visitor polls of 1969-73. Beyond the most encompassing list of substantive spaces, places, people and things, the "institution" engaged by Haacke can best be defined as the net-

work of social and economic relationships between them. Like his *Condensation Cube* (1963-65), and his *MoMA-Poll* (1970), the gallery and museum figure less as objects of critique themselves than as containers in which the largely abstract and invisible forces and relations that traverse particular social spaces can be made visible.⁹

Moving from a substantive understanding of "the institution" as specific places, organizations, and individuals to a conception of it as a social field, the question of what is inside and what is outside becomes much more complex. Engaging those boundaries has been a consistent concern of artists associated with institutional critique. Beginning in 1969 with a *travail in situ* at Wide White Space in Antwerp, Buren realized many works that bridged interior and exterior, artistic and non-artistic sites, revealing how the perception of the same material, the same sign, can change radically depending on where it is viewed.

However, it was Asher who may have realized with the greatest precision Buren's early understanding that even a concept, as soon as it "is announced, and especially when it is 'exhibited as art' ... becomes an ideal-object, which brings us once again to art."¹⁰ With his *Installation Münster (Caravan)*, Asher demonstrated that the institutionalization of art as art depends not on its location in the physical frame of an institution, but in conceptual or perceptual frames. First presented in the 1977 edition of *Skulptur Projekte in Münster*, the work consisted of a rented recreational trailer, or caravan, parked in different parts of the city each week during the exhibition. At the museum serving as a reference point for the show, visitors could find information about where the caravan could be viewed *in situ* that week. At the site itself, however, nothing indicated that the caravan was art or had any connection to the exhibition. To casual passersby, it was nothing but a caravan.

Asher took Duchamp one step further. Art is not art because it is signed by an artist or shown in a museum or any other "institutional" site. Art is art when it exists for discourses and practices that recognize it as art, value and evaluate it as art, and consume it as art, whether as object, gesture, representation, or only idea. The institution of art is not something external to any work of art but the irreducible condition of its existence as art. No matter how public in placement, immaterial, transitory, relational, everyday, or even invisible, what is announced and perceived as art is always already institutionalized, simply because it exists within the perception of participants in the field of art as art, a perception not necessarily aesthetic but fundamentally social in its determination.

What Asher thus demonstrated is that the institution of art is not only "institutionalized" in organizations like museums and objectified in art objects. It is also internalized and embodied in people. It is internalized in the competencies, conceptual models, and modes of perception that allow us



Daniel Buren, *Papiers collés blanc et vert*, work *in situ*, on the invitation of the Apollinaire Gallery (Milan) for “Prospect 1968: Zeitung zur Internationalen Vorschau auf die Kunst in den Galerien der Avantgarde,” Städtische Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, September 1968. Detail.
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to produce, write about, and understand art, or simply to recognize art as art, whether as artists, critics, curators, art historians, dealers, collectors, or museum visitors. And above all, it exists in the interests, aspirations, and criteria of value that orient our actions and define our sense of worth. These competencies and dispositions determine our own institutionalization as members of the field of art. They make up what Pierre Bourdieu called *habitus*: the “social made body,” the institution made mind.

There is, of course, an “outside” of the institution, but it has no fixed, substantive characteristics. It is only what, at any given moment, does not exist as an object of artistic discourses and practices. But just as art cannot exist outside the field of art, we cannot exist outside the field of art, at least not as artists, critics, curators, etc. And what we do outside the field, to the extent that it remains outside, can have no effect within it. So if there is no outside for us, it is not because the institution is perfectly closed, or exists as an apparatus in a “totally administered society,” or has grown all-encompassing in size and scope. It is because the institution is inside of us, and we can’t get outside of ourselves.

Has institutional critique been institutionalized? Institutional critique has always been institutionalized. It could only have emerged within and, like all art, can only function within the institution art. The insistence of institutional critique on the inescapability of institutional determination may, in fact, be what distinguishes it most precisely from other legacies of the historical avant garde. It may be unique among those legacies in its recognition of the failure of avant-garde movements and the consequences of that failure; that is, not the destruction of the institution of art, but its explosion beyond the traditional boundaries of specifically artistic objects and aesthetic criteria. The institutionalization of Duchamp’s negation of artistic competence with the readymade transformed that negation into a supreme affirmation of the omnipotence of the artistic gaze and its limitless incorporative power. It opened the way for the artistic conceptualization—and commodification—of everything. As Bürger could already write in 1974, “If an artist today signs a stove pipe and exhibits it, that artist certainly does not denounce the art market but adapts to it. Such adaptation does not eradicate the idea of individual creativity, it affirms it, and the reason is the failure of the avant-garde.”¹¹

It is artists—as much as museums or the market—who, in their very efforts to escape the institution of art, have driven its expansion. With each attempt to evade the limits of institutional determination, to embrace an outside, to redefine art or integrate it into everyday life, to reach “everyday” people and work in the “real” world, we expand our frame and bring more of the world into it. But we never escape it.

Of course, that frame has also been transformed in the process. The question is how? Discussions of that transformation have tended to revolve around oppositions like inside and outside, public and private, elitism and populism. But when these arguments are used to assign political value to substantive conditions, they often fail to account for the underlying distributions of power that are reproduced even as conditions change, and they thus end up serving to legitimate that reproduction. To give the most obvious example, the enormous expansion of museum audiences, celebrated under the banner of populism, has proceeded hand in hand with the continuous rise of entrance fees, excluding more and more lower-income visitors, and the creation of new forms of elite participation with increasingly differentiated hierarchies of membership, viewings, and galas, the exclusivity of which is broadly advertised in fashion magazines and society pages. Far from becoming less elitist, ever-more popular museums have become vehicles for the mass-marketing of elite tastes and practices that, while perhaps less rarefied in terms of the aesthetic competencies they demand, are ever more rarefied economically as prices rise. All of which also increases the demand for the products and services of art professionals.

However, the fact that we are trapped in our field does not mean that we have no effect on, and are not affected by, what takes place beyond its boundaries. Once again, Haacke may have been the first to understand and represent the full extent of the interplay between what is inside and outside the field of art. While Asher and Buren examined how an object or sign is transformed as it traverses physical and conceptual boundaries, Haacke engaged in the “institution” as a network of social and economic relationships, making visible the complicities among the apparently opposed spheres of art, the state, and corporations. It may be Haacke, above all, who evokes characterizations of the institutional critic as an heroic challenger, fearlessly speaking truth to power—and justifiably so, as his work has been subject to vandalism, censorship, and parliamentary showdowns. However, anyone familiar with his work should recognize that, far from trying to tear down the museum, Haacke’s project has been an attempt to *defend* the institution of art from institutionalization by political and economic interests.

That the art world, now a global multibillion-dollar industry, is not part of the “real world” is one of the most absurd fictions of art discourse. The current market boom, to

mention only the most obvious example, is a direct product of neoliberal economic policies. It belongs, first of all, to the luxury consumption boom that has gone along with growing income disparities and concentrations of wealth—the beneficiaries of Bush’s tax cuts are our patrons—and, secondly, to the same economic forces that have created the global real-estate bubble: lack of confidence in the stock market due to falling prices and corporate accounting scandals, lack of confidence in the bond market due to the rising national debt, low interest rates, and regressive tax cuts. And the art market is not the only art world site where the growing economic disparities of our society are reproduced. They can also be seen in what are now only nominally “nonprofit” organizations like universities—where MFA programs rely on cheap adjunct labor—and museums, where anti-union policies have produced compensation ratios between the highest- and lowest-paid employees that now surpass forty to one.

Representations of the “art world” as wholly distinct from the “real world,” like representations of the “institution” as discrete and separate from “us,” serve specific functions in art discourse. They maintain an imaginary distance between the social and economic interests we invest in through our activities and the euphemized artistic, intellectual, and even political “interests” (or disinterest) that provide those activities with content and justify their existence. And with these representations, we also reproduce the mythologies of volunteerist freedom and creative omnipotence that have made art and artists such attractive emblems for neoliberalism’s entrepreneurial “ownership-society” optimism. That such optimism has found perfect artistic expression in neo-Fluxus practices like relational aesthetics, which are now in perpetual vogue, demonstrates the degree to which what Bürger called the avant-garde’s aim to integrate “art into life praxis” has evolved into a highly ideological form of escapism. But this is not just about ideology. We are not only symbols of the rewards of the current regime: In this art market, we are its direct material beneficiaries.

Every time we speak of the “institution” as other than “us,” we disavow our role in the creation and perpetuation of its conditions. We avoid responsibility for, or action against, the everyday complicities, compromises, and censorship—above all, self-censorship—which are driven by our own interests in the field and the benefits we derive from it. It’s not a question of inside or outside, or the number and scale of various organized sites for the production, presentation, and distribution of art. It’s not a question of being against the institution: We are the institution. It’s a question of what kind of values we institutionalize, what forms of practice we reward, and what kinds of rewards we aspire to. Because the institution of art is internalized, embodied, and performed by individuals, these are the questions that institutional critique demands we ask, above all, of ourselves.

Finally, it is this self-questioning—more than a thematic like “the institution,” no matter how broadly conceived—that defines institutional critique as a practice. If, as Bürger put it, the self-criticism of the historical avant garde intended “the abolition of autonomous art” and its integration “into the praxis of life,” it failed in both its aims and strategies.¹² However, the very institutionalization that marked this failure became the condition of institutional critique. Recognizing that failure and its consequences, institutional critique turned from the increasingly bad-faith efforts of neo-avant gardes at dismantling or escaping the institution of art and aimed instead to *defend* the very institution that the institutionalization of the avant garde’s “self-criticism” had created the potential for: an institution of critique. And it may be this very institutionalization that allows institutional critique to judge the institution of art against the critical claims of its legitimizing discourses, against its self-representation as a site of resistance and contestation, and against its mythologies of radicality and symbolic revolution.

Notes

1. Michael Kimmelman, “Tall French Visitor Takes up Residence in the Guggenheim,” *New York Times* (March 25, 2005).
2. Andrea Fraser, “In and Out of Place,” *Art in America* (June 1985) 124.
3. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art,” *Artforum* (September 1982) 48.
4. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984) 22.
5. Marcel Broodthaers quoted in Benjamin Buchloh, “Open Letters, Industrial Poems,” *October* #42 (Fall 1987) 71.
6. Daniel Buren, “The Function of the Museum,” in A.A. Bronson and Peggy Gale, eds. *Museums by Artists* (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1983) 58.
7. Daniel Buren, “The Function of the Studio,” in *Museums by Artists*, 61.
8. Hans Haacke, “All the Art That’s Fit to Show,” in *Museums by Artists*, 152.
9. In this, Haacke’s work parallels the theory of art as a social field developed by Pierre Bourdieu.
10. Daniel Buren, “Beware!” *Studio International* (March 1970) 101.
11. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 52-3.
12. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 54.