



# **New Institutionalism**

**VERKSTED #1, 2003**

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**OFFICE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART NORWAY**



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**A CURRICULUM FOR  
INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE,  
OR THE PROFESSIONALIZATION  
OF CONCEPTUAL ART**

Julia Bryan-Wilson

*"An intellectual dispute like the one on museums must be fought with specific arguments."*

Theodor Adorno, "Valéry Proust Museum"

1.

The title "A Curriculum for Institutional Critique" was suggested to me when I was asked to write this essay. I have retained it, with some hesitation, because I was intrigued by the suggestion that institutional critique has become a bounded, teachable field with its own implied canon of texts and staked-out arguments, rather than a discursive domain whose reception is still very much in flux. The writing of such a curriculum risks proposing that the history (singular) of institutional critique has been satisfactorily elucidated, and that there is some scholarly agreement about its key moments such that one can construct a tidy narrative arc of origin, obsolescence, and rebirth.

In fact, such a consensus is probably impossible, given the intensity of disagreement that has followed in the wake of critical assessments of institutional critique, especially those concerned with lineage or influence that seek to nominate ancestors and delineate artistic parentage. The narrative of the emergence of institutional critique is still hotly contested, and the stakes involved in writing this history are high, especially because it means confronting a decade whose legacies we have both inherited and disavowed: the 1960s.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the "meaning" of the 1960s is precisely at issue when consolidating any "curriculum" of art that began in that decade – especially as conceptual art practices continue to be widely influential for artists working today. In light of this complicated background, the aim of the following pages is modest: I consider what it means to "curricularize" institutional critique, and in doing so, lightly touch on some of the

arguments about its historical development. How desirable, or even possible, is it to create a taxonomy of this growing literature?

Institutional critique interrogates the ideological, social, and economic functions of the art market, particularly museums, patronage, and other mechanisms of distribution and display. Artists have addressed how the museum is a specific architectural space (Michael Asher) that collects and classifies objects (Marcel Broodthaers), is dependent upon corporate funds (Hans Haacke), is buttressed by networks of interpretation (Andrea Fraser), is implicated in long-standing systems of racial inequalities (Fred Wilson), and is embedded in distribution and publicity systems such as the art magazine (Dan Graham). (This list itself, highly schematic and grossly incomplete, points to the problems of trying to chart the greatest hits of institutional critique). While this essay considers the relationship between academic and artistic forms of institutional critique, I primarily look at writing about art rather than the art itself. My focus on critical reception, however, should not suggest that the vector of influence only runs in one direction, whereby the language of institutional critique is first invented by artists, then picked up by critics, and finally, in a move that some might consider co-optation, mouthed by the institution itself. On the contrary, its syntax continues to evolve in multiple directions and within a complex nest of identifications; as will become clear, artist, critic, and curator are not distinct positions. Artists often follow the lead of innovative academic writing – the anthropological discourse on collecting, for instance, has served as important theoretical source material for many artists. And far from the museum system being the endpoint of the interpretive chain, it is also productive, exerting pressures and affording opportunities that artists respond to.

Both at its inception and as an ongoing practice, institutional critique hones viewers' awareness about the disciplinary effects of institutional power and its authority to shape meaning. At its best, institutional critique does not simply point out that museums are guardians of culture, but also shows how they are implicated in

larger cultural and social phenomena far outside the strictures of art consumption such as surveillance, nationalism, and advertising. Early 21<sup>st</sup> century disputes about the expansion of commodity culture into almost every facet of everyday life and the increasingly invasive scope of corporate media have made historicizing these issues all the more pressing.

No less than reckoning with the history of the political and social events, writing a history of the art of the 1960s has generated proprietary claims of ownership and authenticity. As Alexander Alberro writes, "From its inception, and continuing to this very day, conceptual art has been entangled in controversy by those who stake claims to its foundational moment."<sup>2</sup> And just as the birth moments are widely debated, so too are the pronouncements of its endpoint. Within a decade of the beginnings of institutional critique, it was (prematurely) declared dead. For instance, in 1975-76, a group of artists and writers who had previous affiliations with the conceptual group Art and Language formed the journal *The Fox*. "What good is a critique of institutions?" asked the premiere issue. The question of failure, as Blake Stimson points out, has haunted conceptualism and institutional critique from its very inception.<sup>3</sup> What does one make of these repeated disputes about its birth pangs and the incessant deathbed proclamations? How could a curriculum reflect such contentions?

## 2.

Certainly to curricularize something is not to resolutely lay its fractiousness to rest, and in recent years attempts have been made to provide overviews and helpful summaries of the history of conceptual art by museums and scholars alike.<sup>4</sup> However, some of these have the tendency to recycle the generally received notions of important precursors, and thus create a fairly static understanding of the historical forces from which institutional critique was forged. A certain

set of established influences and standard artists – the reiteration of familiar names in the list I provide at the beginning of this essay has itself begun to harden into cliché – threatens to obscure other precursors (the anarchist Black Mask/Up Against the Wall Motherfuckers, early Fluxus, etc.).

Even as conceptualism was in its formative years, timelines were being drawn, voices recorded for posterity, and author's statements collected: the creation of this history as it happened was, apparently, urgent business. This flurry of documentation suggests that artists and critics must have felt that something momentous was in the air. Books such as Lucy Lippard's *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object* (1973), Ursula Meyer's *Conceptual Art* (1972), Gregory Battcock's *Idea Art* (1973), and the recently published early interviews with conceptual artists<sup>5</sup> are invaluable archival tools, but much interpretive work has yet to be done. Many histories of institutional critique have been under-researched – its relation to the women's movement and to the ideologies of the New Left, for instance. New scholarship in the fields of art history and cultural policy promises to keep expanding our understanding of this extremely important movement as it continues to be a guiding force within contemporary art making. Examples include Helen Molesworth's essay "Cleaning up in the 1970s: The Work of Judy Chicago, Mary Kelly and Mierle Laderman Ukeles",<sup>6</sup> which posits Ukeles' "maintenance art" as the very threshold of both feminist art and institutional critique. Molesworth suggests that Ukeles' art foregrounds the instability between the (gendered) public and private spheres as they are often constituted within art institutions.

In the introduction to their recent anthology *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, Michael Newman and John Bird have suggested that we are now in the "third phase" of conceptual art's reception. The two previous phases, as they see it, were first, the moment of its birth, and second, the generation of artists who used conceptual art to look at mass culture and reconsider the racial and gendered biases of mu-

seums. The third phase, inaugurated in the 1990s with the upsurge in retrospective exhibitions such as the 1996 Los Angeles MOCA show *Reconsidering the Object of Art*, is “the moment for historicization”.<sup>7</sup> It is not by accident that this third phase, they also point out, has also witnessed the “market triumph” of conceptual art, as well as the adaptation of strategies of institutional critique within the institution itself.

To be sure, conceptual art is not synonymous with institutional critique, as the latter is a specialized, highly political subset of the former. This salient fact means that the history of conceptualism (as a broad rubric) must be somewhat disaggregated from that of institutional critique. The recent boom in textbook-like anthologies or primers for conceptual art hence do not address themselves in much specificity to institutional critique. Tony Godfrey’s 1998 Phaidon overview of conceptual art, for instance, is a terrific teaching tool, but its very generality means that it does not look at institutional critique in any substantive depth. Likewise, the Phaidon “Themes and Movements” compendium *Conceptual Art*, edited by Peter Osborne (2002), lists “institutional critique” as one of conceptualism’s six smaller internal categories. Monographic studies on institutional critique are few and far between; luckily, those that are available are excellent. At the forefront of these book-length treatments is Douglas Crimp’s *On the Museum’s Ruins* (1993), which looks at how the museum delimits the boundaries of artistic modernism in terms of photography, site-specificity, and exhibition practices. Charles Harrison’s *Essays on Art and Language* (2001) is instructive for its focus on the work of one collective conceptual group, even as *Art and Language* has shifted their interest away from their specific brand of language-based institutional critique.

Thus the literature on conceptual art is distinguished from that on institutional critique – and in some cases, this differentiation points to new directions for future scholarship. Take the case of the increasing awareness of conceptual art’s internationalism. The argument that



conceptualism was a global phenomenon linked to the worldwide conditions of social unrest, while hinted at in early shows such as *Information* (New York Museum of Modern Art, 1970) with its inclusion of artists such as Brazilian Cildo Meireles, was consolidated in the 1999 Queens Museum of Art exhibition *Global Conceptualism*. It is now commonplace to include conceptual artists from Latin America along with their European and American counterparts, even if artists from other continents are neglected. But the museum/gallery system that institutional critique pushed against did not exist in some regions, or the option to openly criticize those systems was not available. Thus institutional critique did not develop in some especially repressive countries even as other aspects of conceptual art (its linguistic nature, its appropriation of commodities, its skepticism towards mass culture) flourished. For instance, artists in Chile during the beginning years of the highly censorious Pinochet dictatorship grappled with conceptual frameworks even though their work did not necessarily take on what might be recognized by as institutional critique. Because art institutions were basically unavailable to them, their conceptual-based critiques moved beyond and outside of the boundaries of the art market, flying under the radar of governmental and other institutions rather than directly confronting them.<sup>8</sup> This is one area of research that could be provocatively explored.

### 3.

The battle lines over the shaping of the intellectual archive of institutional critique were never more sharply drawn than in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This was a time in which critics and historians began to assess the ways in which the art of the 1960s was being received; although those responses were often negative, the art was also increasingly acquired and managed by museums. Hal Foster in his 1986 "The Crux of Minimalism" asserted that the denigration of minimalism in the late 1980s was closely linked to a general return to political and artistic conservatism. He stated that the

1980s were marked by a “trashing of the 1960s to justify a return to tradition in art and elsewhere”.<sup>9</sup> By contrast, Foster suggestively argued that minimalism had a primary place as a crucial pivot point in the avant-garde timeline. Rosalind Krauss in her 1990 “The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum” wrote of the misuses of 1960s minimalism to legitimize certain museum acquisition and display policies. She lamented the increasing market cache of minimal sculpture in the late 1980s, which culminated in the Guggenheim’s purchase of the Panza collection and Thomas Krens’ plans for the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, a former industrial space that was renovated as a showcase for pricey minimal objects. As Krauss wrote, the minimalist dream of an aesthetic bodily perception had been revised and contained by the “euphorically dizzy space of the museum as hyperspace”, a museum in which the objects are openly referred to as “assets”.<sup>10</sup> Minimalism, she said, was openly being “used to serve as [the museum’s] emblem”.

This history of minimalism matters because it is now widely accepted that minimalism was the pivotal movement which “activated the viewer’s space” and thus catalyzed an awareness of the institutional frameworks of the gallery and museum system. Such writings as Robert Morris’ “Notes on Sculpture” (1966) provided early accounts of minimalism that stressed its relation to real space and the viewer’s perceptual fields. As Morris wrote of minimal objects, “The better new work takes relationships out the work and makes them a function of space, light and the viewer’s field of vision.” A number of critics seized upon this narrative of minimalism and saw it as the phenomenological segue into institutional critique, which focused more immediately on the conditions of display – this argument has been recently renewed in the intelligent works of James Meyer (2001) and Alex Potts (2000). While Meyer plots the historical emergence of the discursive field of minimalism in the 1960s and Potts places minimal sculpture within a wider frame of theorizations of figurative, modernist, and post-modernist sculpture, both stress the new kinds of bodily and spatial encounters that minimalism proposed.

Writing at the tail end of the boom days of the late 1980s, which saw the art market's embrace of neo-expressionist painterly practice, authors like Krauss and Foster sought to recuperate the lessons of the 1960s and 1970s art world. They looked to minimalism and other movements, such as the explosion of dematerialized conceptual art, in order to chronicle a different history of art, one in which art wanted to make itself at least somewhat resistant to the market. This swell of reassessments of the 1960s in the late 1980s and 1990s also included moves to historicize the artistic practice that was most openly critical of the museum's display practices, ideological programs, and economic forces: institutional critique.

A high-profile controversy regarding the history of conceptual art was ignited by the publication of Benjamin H.D. Buchloh's "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions". First written for the 1989 exhibition catalog for "L'art conceptuel: une perspective", a show at the Musée d'art moderne in Paris that addressed conceptual art from the late 1960s and early 1970s, the essay was subsequently reprinted in the pages of the influential U.S. journal *October*. In what follows, I detail this controversy at some length because it encapsulates many of the competing claims made for institutional critique as it was being looked at anew in the early 1990s. It also echoes an earlier debate regarding the "failure" of conceptualism that took place in the pages of *The Fox*.

In his essay, Buchloh begins, significantly, with questions of historicization and critical distance: how, he asks, do we approach conceptual art, which worked so hard to undo the typical parameters of the art object, with the standard art historical toolbox? And why this return to conceptual art in the late 1980s, after the "rather violent restoration of traditional art forms and procedures of production?"<sup>11</sup> Buchloh's essay tracks a series of stages in the reception of Marcel Duchamp and his readymades, and uses Duchamp as the key figure through which to read both minimal and conceptual art by pointing out the (dis)continuities between the concerns of minimal-

ism and conceptualism and their reinterpretations of Duchampian paradigms of making. Buchloh's article was a watershed for the recent reception of institutional critique. It was one of the very first attempts at a synthetic and comprehensive theory of the trajectory of institutional critique, and was thus subject to particular scrutiny. What is more, it was affiliated with "L'art conceptuel", the first serious museum attempt at a retrospective sweep of the conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s.

Buchloh's "Conceptual Art 1962-1992", particularly its heavy reliance on a narrative of Duchamp's influence, set off fierce criticism, and October published rebuttals by conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth and former conceptual art dealer Seth Siegelaub. At the heart of these criticisms were questions about Buchloh's attempt to construct a kind of timeline (even as Buchloh himself explicitly foregrounds this problem). Kosuth accuses him of a "wholesale falsification of history" that is written in the guise of a "scholarly, 'authoritative' genealogy".<sup>12</sup> Siegelaub, for his part, insists that Buchloh's account is clouded by a "Duchamp fixation", and hence is actually deeply ahistorical. Further, Siegelaub claims that it has "little, if any, relationship to the social, economic, or cultural, i.e. historical, period, which it pretends to describe...[I]t is hard to imagine how one can deal with that period without mentioning, even in a passing footnote, for example, May '68 or the U.S. War in Vietnam."<sup>13</sup>

Siegelaub then offers up a list of other influences – those besides Duchamp – that could and should play a role in any history of conceptual art, ending with the Vietnam War. What this alternative list means to nominate is a different sort of history of the 1960s-1970s and to stake a claim for its ongoing relevance; a move that Buchloh, in his replies to their criticisms, dismisses as "mechanistic determinism". Buchloh is skeptical of what he sees as Siegelaub's possessive nature towards the time period: "according to [his] astonishingly materialist ideas about history, only eyewitness accounts are reliable." Such an exchange displays a remarkable parallel to many

contemporary debates about the history of the 1960s: it is the “you had to be there” argument, which is persuasive yet utterly misleading and politically problematic. Siegelau’s main bone to pick is that Buchloh’s reading inadequately addresses the mutual inflection of political and artistic avant-gardes at this time. Whether or not this is a fair criticism is up for debate, especially since Buchloh’s readings of individual artists such as Broodthaers and Buren often take up precisely this issue.<sup>14</sup>

#### 4.

It would be wrong to read the rancor regarding the deployment of conceptual art’s history in order to justify the creation of two different curricula about institutional critique – one which starts with Duchamp and the other with, say, the Vietnam War. While it is true that a Duchampian model might have a quite different reading list than one that privileges, say, the political-social context of the late 1960s and that looks towards collection action and the growing tide of a radical anti-institutionalism, the responsible thing to do is to teach the argument itself. Clearly we need all the histories, and we need to keep arguing, instead of presuming, their relevance. As Blake Stimson notes in his introduction to *Conceptual Art: A Critical Reader*, it might be more useful to think of “the prism of 1968 as an epochal historical and art-historical moment.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, outlining the influence of the social protest on institutional critique should not be strictly separated from detailing its art-historical influences, but we do need to attend to what kind, and how strong, these effects were. Specificity matters here, and it is thus important that younger scholars are producing focused, in-depth treatments of these histories, such as Alexander Alberro’s book-length study on Siegelau’s enormous influence in the rise of curatorial/marketing practices of conceptual art<sup>16</sup> and Frazer Ward’s look at “critical publicity” (elaborated through an explicitly Habermasian lens).<sup>17</sup>

It is increasingly evident that the search for origins (leading some back to the readymade, others to the political critiques of the Situationists, others to the social unrest of the 1960s) is not necessarily the most satisfying approach. How can my phantom curriculum account for this problem, especially when art history can still be so riveted by the drama of influence and teleology? To put it mildly, institutional critique poses challenges to traditional structures of art history, especially those that are primarily object-oriented. From the start, institutional critique aimed to sidestep conventional formal analysis, not least because of its repression or elimination of evidently visual goals. Artists were impacted by diverse influences (from anarchist credos to structuralist thought), and as such no single rigidly defined methodology can fully explain or encapsulate their works. Nor is the exhibition space a stable site of inquiry, as many artists, distrusting the consolidated economies of large museums, nominated other venues to display their work: art magazines, Xeroxed pamphlets, postcards, and ephemeral events. Likewise, authorial models of analysis are unstable, as it is vital to theorize the place of artistic coalitions and the impact of collective practice. Institutional critique's numerous evasions of conventional art history lead to the inevitable question: who is best equipped to formulate this history?

From the beginning the literature on institutional critique has been written primarily by artists themselves; many have suggested that this represents the colonization of the position of the critic. During the early days of institutional critique, artists wrote brief polemical essays which began to unravel the connections between the economics and aesthetics of museums, including Daniel Buren's 1970 "The Function of the Museum",<sup>18</sup> and Robert Smithson's 1972 "Cultural Confinement".<sup>19</sup> Both of these works criticized the ostensible "neutrality" of sites of art displays; as Smithson put it, "the function of the warden-curator is to separate art from the rest of society." In very different ways, Buren's and Smithson's works of this period created friction for the museum, either by subverting its drive to

preserve fictions of originality (Buren's stripes) or by attempting to remove their works from its confines (Smithson's earthworks).

These works do not, of course, "escape" the museum – there was traffic in the photos of Smithson's land art, for instance, and Buren's stripes are now little more than a signature motif. But in the few years around 1969/70, artists began to be concerned with the connections between museums and larger economic and social systems. Any rich history of this period would thus also include the accounts of political groups who agitated for change within the museum in the late 1960s such as the Art Workers' Coalition (whose members included Hans Haacke and Carl Andre) and the Guerrilla Art Action Group. The Art Workers' Coalition and the Guerrilla Art Action Group organized explicitly activist, or even antagonistic, confrontations against the corporate character of the New York museum system and its connections to the military-industrial complex; chronicles of their actions can be found in Lucy Lippard's "The Art Workers' Coalition: Not a History" (1984) and in GAAG: The Guerrilla Art Action Group 1969-1976, A Selection (1978).

Other influential artists' writings which focused on unmasking the inherently charged spaces of museums include Brian O'Doherty's *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (1986). O'Doherty – himself an artist who practiced under the name Patrick Ireland – theorized how the sanctified architectures of museums and galleries impact the viewer's reception of art objects. First published as a series of articles in *Artforum* magazine in 1976, this book is now a standard text in the history of institutional critique, not least for its inclusion of examples of artworks that challenge or exceed the limits of the gallery space itself from the entire span of the twentieth century (works such as Kurt Schwitters's "Merzbau" and Yves Klein's "Le Plein"). Another incisive text is Hans Haacke's 1986 "Museums: Managers of Consciousness". Written for the exhibition catalogue for a show at New York's New Museum, this essay argues that corporate sponsorship shapes museum policy, as museums police themselves

to fit corporate patrons' standards. Haacke, an astute writer as well as one of the leading practitioners of institutional critique, writes: "Every museum is perforce a political institution, no matter whether it is privately run or maintained and supervised by governmental agencies. Those who hold the purse strings and have the authority over hiring and firing are, in effect, in charge of every element of the organization, if they choose to use their powers."<sup>20</sup>

As much as artists have been at the forefront of writings on institutional critique, there is of course still much to be done, and art history, as well as museum studies, anthropology, and cultural studies, play a critical role in the ongoing debates about what "curricula" to develop. At a time when institutional critique has been embraced by artists and institutions alike, reflections about its multiple, tangled roots prove instructive – for one thing, they keep us mindful of institutional critique's antagonistic relationship to the commodification of art.

## 5.

But let's face facts: any fretting about the construction of a history of institutional critique is irrelevant. To a large extent, such a curriculum has not only already been written but eagerly digested and regurgitated. This is, after all, the age of curatorial studies, in which the institutional basis of art is taken as a given, and the marketing and packaging of contemporary art has become a specialized focus of inquiry for thousands of students. Such programs are not in themselves suspect, but suggest the rapid pace at which the analysis of artistic modes of production is being replaced by a careerist, managerial study of how to facilitate the transfer of objects within the largely corporatized economic systems of art.

From as early as the 1970 Information show at the Museum of Modern Art, institutional critique has been, if not welcomed, then at least



tolerated within the very sites it sought to challenge. The Guerilla Art Action Group, which during the Vietnam War staged bloody demonstrations against MoMA's board of trustees and their economic ties to the manufacturers of napalm, was asked by the director of the MoMA in 1970 to re-perform one of their unannounced protest pieces in what was essentially a commissioned spectacle. (Disgusted, GAAG said no.) Perhaps the museum dreams of itself as not just sympathetic to but an agent of the avant-garde. To a large extent, the museum has embraced such critiques because it believes its mission to be in accordance with progressive art practices and even politics. It does not think of itself as neutral, but highly receptive and open to criticism. And the absorption of institutional critique has been so thorough that in recent years the museum has proclaimed itself to be not a site of political engagement but one of epiphanic inspiration, or so the lilted title to a 1999 New York MoMA show *The Museum as Muse* suggests. Institutional critique threatens to devolve into a gimmick.

Perhaps, then, we are witnessing what might be properly called the professionalization of institutional critique: young artists and up-and-coming art administrators alike cut their teeth on the premise that the museum itself is a loaded space, that the framing of art contributes mightily to its reception, and that its corporate sponsors are a necessary evil. It is a given that the gallery space is no longer the proverbial "white cube" named by O'Doherty in 1974. These facts are taken as obvious, and thus naturalized and made to seem inevitable as they are turned into fodder for superficial self-referential museum-related games. In recent years, numerous exhibitions and studies have suggested that the museum functions now as a source of creative fodder rather than a critical site of interrogation – the museum has become a benevolent muse. Even more than in the 1960s, the early 2000s have seen the "rise of the curator as creator," as Bruce Altshuler has called it,<sup>21</sup> with global biennials providing ever-prestigious launching pads for the curatorial star system.

Buchloh's query about the timing of the late 1980s/early 90s re-evaluations of conceptual art is instructive. A similar question might be asked now, over a decade later. Why the return to institutional critique today, especially if this return is in the service of "curricularizing" (and hence, perhaps, solidifying the art of the 1960s and 1970s into a pre-packaged set of artists and texts)? In the past decade, we have witnessed the tremendous growth of global museums and international partnerships; recently, however, their outrageous spending has been curtailed and funding slashed due to the depressed world economy. As some artists and audiences alike are increasingly wary of the spectacularization of the museum industry and seek asylum in smaller alternative spaces, blockbuster shows with lavish corporate backing continue to draw mass viewership. Museums have embraced the idioms of institutional critique in the last five years in a way that was unthinkable thirty years ago, when artists such as Haacke and Buren faced censorship from the Guggenheim Museum. Maybe institutional critique has become just another way for museums to promote themselves – what better way to publicize one's institution than to display artwork that explicitly addresses it? As Thomas Crow has written, "the museum or gallery has become only too happy to be commented upon, defaced or dismantled, and thereby enhanced in its importance and prestige as a provider of stimulating moments of perception."<sup>22</sup>

However, of all the models for art's political engagement offered by 1960s conceptualism, institutional critique has been the most generative and productive. It survives as a thriving art practice because it continues to offer up suggestions for ways to rethink connections between corporate and state power and individual subject-formation, and the ways these are mediated by institutions. Indeed, some of the most interesting recent writings that bear upon institutional critique have focused on the museum as a site of knowledge and power, many of them indebted to Michel Foucault's theories of governmentality, e.g. Tony Bennett's *The Birth of the Museum* (1995) and Eileen Hooper-Greenhill's anthology *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (1992). Studies of exhibitions from the anthropologi-

cal angle have also been fertile places to examine museums, especially within the context of post-colonial studies. Relevant books include *Thinking about Exhibitions*<sup>23</sup> and *Museum Culture: Histories, Discourses, Spectacles*,<sup>24</sup> and they often integrate earlier writings central to artistic institutional critique such as those by Buren and Haacke. Some of this work falls under the heading of critical museum studies, although it is fundamentally interdisciplinary in nature, drawing upon theories of spectatorship, cultural policy, identity and representation, and colonial collecting.

## 6.

To write of art institutions in the spring of 2003 is to be acutely aware that, on the one hand, museums as public spaces are increasingly irrelevant, as critical art migrates onto the internet or takes place in dystopian site-specific arenas. On the other hand, during the recent looting of the Baghdad Museum, we were horrifically, tragically reminded that such repositories are absolutely crucial for the collecting, storing, and interpreting of culture. Although from the start many bemoaned the eventual absorption of institutional critique within the fabric of the art market, I think we should remain optimistic about 21<sup>st</sup> century art and the possibilities that it might, at least temporarily, put pressure upon the flexible systems of advanced capitalism. Certainly, “how do we get around the museum?” is the wrong question to ask in this day when prestige, money, and support flow across international borders in far-reaching, nomadic circulations. How much is the power within the “art world” – if there is such a thing – generated by museums nowadays? I don’t know, but it seems we need to totally rethink our understanding of autonomy and patronage, and certainly of criticism and canonization. This might require a recalibration of our idea of the avant-garde and its relationship to the market, of a kind that would expand our definition of the market to include the institutionalization of the academy, the bureaucratization of curation, and the professionalization of art criticism.

What an age of contradictions: the spectacular museum-building frenzy has subsided from its untenable peak, but global expansions (the proposed Guggenheim in Brazil, for instance) proceed apace.<sup>25</sup> More than ever, museums market themselves as space of entertainment as well as contemplative temples of high art. After the destruction of the World Trade Center, New York City museums flung their doors open with special free days, offering their art up as restive places of escape. What does this tell us about the actual use of art in daily life? How does art continue to be sold as detached from the realm of the political and social world? Some would argue that the institution as an actual space is less and less relevant in the electronic age of dissemination, but I think that museums are still vital semi-public arenas in which the exchange of ideas is brokered. Moments when museums utterly fail us – when they cave in to censorship – as well as moments when we fail museums – the destruction of the Baghdad Museum – remind us how necessary responsible museums are.

Early practitioners of institutional critique held out the hope that they could transform museums, provide more democratic relationships with audiences, forge different types of artistic identities that were not based on the idea of the singular genius, and circumvent the commodity culture of art buying. That was a large part of the promise of the conceptual art in the 1960s. Any curriculum for institutional critique will need to keep alive this activist, even utopian, component. It will need to understand that the “institution” in question is still just as broadly defined as its earliest practitioners imagined: not merely a physical set of walls and rooms, but the labyrinthine procedures of capitalism itself. As such, these institutions are contradictory – bound with corporate interests, fraught with ideological agendas, but also vibrant with real moments of pleasure, knowledge, and resistance.

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## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> I use the term "the 1960s" as a convenient shorthand rather than an actual calendar decade. Depending on what stress one wants to give certain events, the start and end dates of the 1960s can shift. In terms of Conceptual art, it makes some sense to mark the decade as between 1965 and 1975, which roughly coincides, in the U.S., with the Vietnam War era. For one account of the difficulty of periodizing, see Frederic Jameson's "Periodizing the 60s", in Sayres et al., 1984.
- <sup>2</sup> "Reconsidering Conceptual Art, 1966-1977," in Alberro & Stimson, 1999, pp. xci-xxxvi.
- <sup>3</sup> "The Promise of Conceptual Art," in *ibid.*
- <sup>4</sup> Two recent Phaidon studies – Tony Godfrey's *Conceptual Art* (1998) and Peter Osborne's *Conceptual Art (Themes and Movements)* (2002) – and the anthology edited by Alberro and Stimson (1999) are examples of books explicitly devoted to conceptualism. Other works that deal with the general time period 1965-75 are Buchloh (2000), Ratcliff (2000), and Rorimer (2001). Exhibition catalogs include Goldstein & Rorimer (1995), *L'art conceptuel* (1989), and *Global Conceptualism: Points of Origin 1950s-80* (1999).
- <sup>5</sup> Cf. Alberro & Norvell, 2001.
- <sup>6</sup> Cf. Newman & Bird, 1999, pp. 107-122.
- <sup>7</sup> Cf. Introduction in Newman & Bird, 1999.
- <sup>8</sup> Cf. Richard, 1986.
- <sup>9</sup> Cf. Hal Foster, "The Crux of Minimalism", in Singerman, 1986; revised and reprinted in Foster, 1996.
- <sup>10</sup> Cf. Krauss, 1990, p. 3-17.
- <sup>11</sup> Cf. Buchloh, 1990, pp. 105-143.
- <sup>12</sup> Cf. Kosuth, 1991, pp. 152-154.
- <sup>13</sup> Cf. Siegelau, 1991, pp. 155-157.
- <sup>14</sup> Cf. Buchloh, 2000.
- <sup>15</sup> Cf. Alberro & Stimson, 1999, p. xlvii.
- <sup>16</sup> Cf. Alberro, 2003.
- <sup>17</sup> Cf. Ward, 1995, pp. 71-89.
- <sup>18</sup> Cf. Buren, 1973; reprinted in Bronson & Gale, 1983, pp. 57-74.
- <sup>19</sup> Cf. Smithson, 1972; reprinted in Flam, 1996, pp. 154-56.
- <sup>20</sup> Cf. Haacke, 1986, pp. 60-73.
- <sup>21</sup> Cf. Altshuler, 1994.
- <sup>22</sup> Cf. Crow, 1996, pp. 193.
- <sup>23</sup> Greenberg et al., 1996.
- <sup>24</sup> Sherman & Rogoff, 1994.
- <sup>25</sup> In June 2003, a Brazilian court blocked the Guggenheim's plans to build a lavish outpost in Rio after a public outcry that the money would be better spent on social services.