01 2006

Notes on Institutional Critique

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The very term "institutional critique" seems to indicate a direct connection between a method and an object: the method being the critique and the object the institution. In the first wave of institutional critique from the late 1960s and early 1970s – long since celebrated and relegated by art history – these terms could apparently be even more concretely and narrowly defined; the critical method was an artistic practice, and the institution in question was the art institution, mainly the art museum, but also galleries and collections. Institutional critique thus took on many forms, such as artistic works and interventions, critical writings or (art-)political activism. However, in the so-called second wave, from the 1980s, the institutional framework became somewhat expanded to include the artist's role (the subject performing the critique) as institutionalized, as well as an investigation into other institutional spaces (and practices) besides the art space.[1] Both waves are today themselves part of the art instititution, in the form of art history and education as much as in the general de-materialized and post-conceptual art practice of contemporary art. It shall not be my purpose here, however, to discuss or access the meaning of institutional critique as an art historical canon, or to engage in the writing of such a canon (I shall respectfully leave that endeavor for the *Texte zur Kunst* and *October* magazines of this

world). Instead, though, I would like to point out a convergence between the two waves, that seems to have drastically changed in the current "return" of institutional critique that may or may not constitute a third wave. In either of its historical emergences, institutional critique was a practice mainly, if not exclusively, conducted by artists, and directed *against* the (art) institutions, as a critique of their ideological and representative social function(s). Art's institutions, that may or may not contain the artists' work, were seen, in the words of Robert Smithson, as spaces of "cultural confinement" and circumscription, and thus as something to attack aesthetically, politically and theoretically. The institution was posed as a problem (for artists). In contrast, the current institutional-critical discussions seem predominantly propagated by curators and directors of the very same institutions, and they are usually opting *for* rather than against them. That is, they are not an effort to oppose or even destroy the institution, but rather to modify and solidify it. The institution is not only a problem, but also a solution!

There has been a shift, then, in the placement of institutional critique, not only in historical time, but also in terms of the subjects who direct and perform the critique – it has moved from an outside to an inside. Interestingly, Benjamin Buchloh has described the historical moment of conceptual art as a movement from institutional critique and "the aesthetic of administration to the critique of institutions", in a famous and controversial essay entitled, tellingly, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions". While Buchloh focuses on the emergence of conceptualism, his suggestive distinction is perhaps even more pertinent now that institutional critique is literally being performed by administrative aestheticians, i.e. museum directors, curators etc.[2] Taking her

cue from Buchloh, Andrea Fraser goes a step further in her recent essay "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique", where she claims that a movement between an inside and an outside of the institution is no longer possible, since the structures of the institution have become totally internalized. "We are the institution", Fraser writes, and thus concludes that it is rather a question of creating critical institutions – what she termes "an institution *of* critique", established through self-questioning and self-reflection.[3] Fraser also writes that the institutions of art should not be seen as an autonomous field, separate from the rest of the world, the same way that "we" are not separate from the institution. While I would certainly agree with any attempt to view art institutions as part of a larger ensemble of socio-economic and disciplinary spaces, I am nonetheless confused by the simultaneous attempt to integrate the art world into the current (politico-economic) world system *and* the upholding of a "we" of the artworld itself. Who exactly is this "we"? If the artworld is seen as part of a generalized institutionalization of social subjects (that in turn internalizes the institutionalization), what and where are the demarcation lines for entry, for visibility and representation? If one of the criteria for institutions is given in the exclusions performed by them (as inherent in any collection), the question which subjects fall outside institutionalization, not due to a willful act or exodus as certain artistic movements thought and desired, but through the expulsions at the very center of institutions that allow them to institutionalize? Obviously, this would require a very expanded notion of institutional critique, that lies somewhat outside the history of institutional critique as discussed here.

So, to return to the object at hand, institutional critique as an art practice: what does it mean when the practice of institutional critique and analysis has shifted from artists to curators and critics,

and when the institution has become internalized in artists and curators alike (through education, through art historical canon, through daily praxis)? Analyzed in terms of negative dialectics, this would seem to indicate the total co-optation of institutional critique by the institutions (and by implication and extension, the co-optation of resistance by power), and thus make institutional critique as a *critical* method completely obsolete. Institutional critique, as co-opted, would be like a bacteria that may have temporarily weakened the patient – the institution – but only in order to strengthen the immune system of that patient in the long run. However, such a conclusion would hinge around notions of subjectivities, agencies and spatialities that institutional critique, arguably, tried to deconstruct. It would imply that the historical institutional critique was somehow "original" and "pure", thus confirming the authenticity of the artist-subjects performing it (as opposed to the current "institutional" subjects), and consequently reaffirming one of the ideas that institutional critique set out to circumvent, namely the notion of authentic subjects per se (as represented by the artist, reified by the institution). If institutional critique was indeed a discourse of disclosure and demystification of how the artistic subject as well as object was staged and reified by the institution, then any narrative that (again) posits certain voices and subjects as authentic, as possible incarnations of certain politics and criticalities, must be said to be not only counter to the very project of institutional critique, but perhaps also the ultimate co-optation, or more accurately, hostile take-over of it. Institutional critique is, after all, not primarily about the intentionalities and identities of subjects, but rather about the politics and inscriptions of institutions (and, thus, about how subjects are always already threaded through specific and specifiable institutional spaces).

Rather, one must try to historize the moments of institutional critique and look at how it has been successful, in terms of being integrated into the education of artists and curators, that is of what Julia Bryan-Wilson has termed "the curriculum of institutional critique".[4] One can then see institutional critique not as a historical period and/or genre within art history, but rather as an analytical tool, a method of spatial and political criticism and articulation that can be applied not only to the artworld, but to disciplinary spaces and institutions in general. An institutional critique of institutional critique, what can be termed "institutionalized critique", has then to question the role of education, historicization and how institutional auto-critique not only leads to a questioning of the institution and what it institutes, but also becomes a mechanism of control within new modes of governmentality, precisely through its very act of internalization. And this is the expanded notion of institutional critique that I briefly mentioned above, and which could become the legacy of the historical movements as much as an orientation for what so-called "critical art institutions" claim to be.

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[1] See James Meyer's essay "Whatever Happened to Institutional Critique?", which tries to establish a genealogy rather than (art) history proper of institutional critique. Reprinted in Peter Weibel, *Kontext Kunst*, 1993.

[2] See Benjamin Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions", *October 55*, 1990, pp. 105–143.

[3] Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique", *Artforum*, September 2005, XLIV, No. 1, pp. 278–283.

[4] See Julia Bryan-Wilson, "A Curriculum of Institutional Critique", in: Jonas Ekeberg (ed.), *New Institutionalism*, Oslo: OCA/verksted, 2003, pp. 89–109.