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Anti-Canonization. The Differential Knowledge of Institutional Critique

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Wanting to canonize institutional critique art practices is a rather paradoxical endeavor. The reason for this is quickly evident: canonizations are themselves an essential part specifically of the institutional practices that the practices of institutional critique refer to – and indeed *critically* refer to. Tacitly ignoring one of these critical impulses is hence inscribed in every canonization attempt, even though a retrospective acknowledgement of the relevance of these impulses is intended. "Relevance" itself is categorized in the framework of a historiography that is entangled in its own preconditions, clinging jealously to the notion that in the end it has to be the art whose history is to be written.

The results are well known, not only in terms of the art subsumed under the name "institutional critique", but also in terms of what is called "political art" in general: Bert Brecht is treated as a revolutionary of theater art, who was eccentric enough to be a communist as well; the Situationists as oddballs of fine art, who no less eccentrically maintained that changing the perception of the streets was more important than changing our perception of

painting. And the "institutional critique art" subsumed under this name? As a "current" it has meanwhile also sufficiently aged to provide a welcome occasion for various historicizations, self-historicizations or even "examinations of topicality", which regularly become entangled in the self-referentiality specific to the art field instead of examining it – and specifically examining it as *institutional practice*.

It is not particularly helpful when one established canon or another is itself declared – in a duplication of the retrospective gesture – the object of negotiation by contrasting it with a possible "other" or expanded canon. This is naturally not intended to deny that a critical query and contestation of dominant canonizations, their complicity with social-political power relations, their legitimizing and stabilizing function in terms of these hegemonic relations were (and are) an important element of the insights of institutional critique. Nevertheless, guidelines for action are not to be seamlessly derived from theoretical insights in the sense that the *end* of changing criticized conditions is already to be reached with the *means* of an expanded or counter-canon. This circumvention suffers from the problem of all superficial theories of hegemony: an insufficient reflection on the level of the means themselves. Where the critical impulse is at least maintained as a social-political one, this is usually accompanied by a fetishization of the ends, which ultimately obscures a critical examination of the means altogether; where it withdraws into the self-contemplation of the contexts it started from (and this is of particular interest here), the result is the fetishization of a certain *form of ends*.

What is fetishized in the latter case is less the end itself, but rather the form in which it is sought, that is, more precisely, the form of aiming at something or the band that links the means and the ends together. And this link proves to be all the more deceptive, since

an incautious consideration of the form of ends and the means may depict one and the same thing. Pursuing an end according to a certain form and treating it solely within the confines of this form, however, does not at all signify a sufficient reflection on the means. Instead, it simply signifies fixing the means as such to a spectrum placed beyond the realm of critique, a spectrum which yet results from a specific, fundamentally contingent connection between means and ends in need of reflection. And it ultimately signifies constraining the possible ends themselves, to the extent that the only acceptable end is one that corresponds to a given spectrum of means.[1]

A flagrant example for fixing institutional critique art practices to art as the form of ends is found, for instance, in the issue of *Texte zur Kunst* from last September devoted to institutional critique, where Isabelle Graw proposes expanding the canon of "the usual suspects" (Michael Asher, Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke, Andrea Fraser, etc.) with artists such as Jörg Immendorff or Martin Kippenberger. The concern that the existing canon could be "at the expense" of certain artists, whose work "could be equally regarded as questioning the institution of art or as an attack on it"[2], is just as characteristic as the "expense" rhetoric that Graw utilizes, which appears at least ambiguous in the context of the magazine that largely conceptionally addresses a match between art criticism and the art market (or more precisely: which is to be read against the background of the highly conflictual interweaving of symbolic and material valuation systems, which is characteristic of the art field throughout modernism).

What is no less characteristic is the specification of Graw's concern, which immediately follows: this relates to painting, the canonical neglect of which is deplored as a proven medium of institutional critique. Accordingly, the figure of the "ostentatiously" solitary

atelier painter, who withdraws his "mental and emotional competences" from public access, is stylized into the carrier of an institutional critique revolt, into an anti-neoliberal spectacle dissident. The genius in individual revolt, the rest can devote themselves to the contemplative viewing of the fruits of his competences[3], specifically – why not? – in the form of "institutional critical" painting. Meanwhile, the "institution of art" carries on in its old familiar bourgeois variation undeterred – if it were not for the unfortunate battle against its neoliberal adversaries, in which it is entangled ...

The irony of all this is that Graw's concerns are not only due to the dissatisfaction that art fixed to "its presumed capability of critique"[4] is "underestimated", but also that they claim to do justice to another concern, namely that an "inflationary assertion of critique" could ultimately lead to the "neutralization of every possibility of really achieving critique"[5]. The latter concern indeed touches on a central problem that is inextricably linked with the *activity* of critique – as opposed to its mere assertion – and which has been widely discussed in the art field, not least of all since the publication of Boltanski/Chiapello's *The New Spirit of Capitalism*: How does critical activity relate to its effects? To what extent is it capable of keeping alive its differential deployment aimed at change beyond the respective self-assurance of a "critical distance", in other words feeding it into a social context and counteracting its own neutralization or the ways it is even inverted for uncritical purposes?

However, Graw does not let this concern cross the river, but encloses it within the boundaries of the very field that art criticism routinely – *institutionally* – ploughs. For this reason, the questions remain obscured that would arise from the inversion of Graw's suspicion about "fixing" art to its capability for critique: namely

whether the critique that is manifested in institutional critique practices is not underestimated when it is fixed to its character as art. In fact, in terms of canonization, this question can be traced even since the "first generation" of institutional critique art practices as an essential element of the critical impulses of these practices. It may be sufficient here to recall Robert Smithson's essay "Cultural Confinement" from 1972, which sees the conditions for neutralizing the explosiveness of critique specifically in its fixation to being art (and not in the reverse fixation), that is in the confinement of the critical to a predetermined framework of representation:

> "Museums, like asylums and jails, have yards and cells – in other words, neutral rooms called *galleries*. A work of art when placed in a gallery loses its charge, and becomes a portable object or surface disengaged from the outside world. A vacant white room with lights is still a submission to the neutral. [...] The function of the warden-curator is to separate art from the rest of society. Next comes integration. Once the work of art is totally neutralized, ineffective, abstracted, safe, and politically lobotomized, it is ready to be consumed by society."[6]

It would be too simple to reduce the scope of Smithson's criticism to the museum forms of representation and curatorship that it directly refers to. The operative structure that it describes, namely the "political lobotomization" of the potential charge of artistic works that follows from isolation and neutralizing reintegration, can also be observed often enough where art works in public space, intended as political interventions, only provoke meager debates about art or occasionally about cultural policies, instead of really triggering the intended political discussions. The "warden-curator" as functionary of this operative structure is abetted, in turn, by a

whole series of further functionaries, including, not least of all, the professional discourse producers of the art field. This also applies to the artists themselves, whom Smithson is already far from locating in a naively asserted outside the institutional field of power per se, which is evident, for instance, in his polemic against post-minimalist art practices:

> "Also, I am not interested in art works that suggest *process* within the metaphysical limits of the neutral room. There is no freedom in that kind of behavioral game playing. The artist acting like a B. F. Skinner rat doing his *tough* little tricks is something to be avoided. Confined process is no process at all. It would be better to disclose the confinement rather than make illusions of freedom."[7]

The institutional critique impulse originating with artists like Smithson not only ties into the desire for a positively productive "resocialization" of their own activities going beyond the boundaries of the art field, but also into the impulse to critically query one's own role as an artist and the forms of artistic self-confinement. Adrian Piper succinctly formulated the task of self-criticism that becomes apparent in this latter impulse (and which can be expanded to other functionaries within the art field) no less polemically than Smithson in a text written in 1983:

> "[...] there is no biological necessity about a socially conditioned disinclination to perform the difficult and often thankless task of political self-analysis. It is not as though artists are congenitally incapacitated by having right cerebral hemispheres the size of a watermelon and left cerebral hemispheres the size of a peanut."[8]

That not only the sharpness and decisiveness of these kinds of statements, but especially the multiple layers of the critical gesture inherent to them are marginalized in the discussion today, in favor of routine canonizations and counter-canonizations, may have something to do with the fact that the reason for current debates on art institutions and other public institutions is the impact of neoliberal policies on these institutions. And as in other areas as well, the extent of political defensiveness and a lack of orientation in light of rampaging neoliberal reforms is expressed, not least of all, in the defense of instruments and institutions that might well have been the subject of a critical examination yesterday. Instead of targeting what can generally be identified as "art" and classified in "currents", against this background it would seem advisable not to fall back behind the institutional critique of historical political analyses of modern art and exhibition institutions – or "art" as an institutional field – like Carol Duncan's *Civilizing Rituals*[9], for instance, or Tony Bennett's *The Birth of the Museum*[10]. With Bennett's historically precise reconstruction of the modern museum and exhibitionary complex in mind, for example, carried out against the background of Foucault's governmentality analyses[11], a better starting point would be based on considering an – inherently contradictory[12] – overlapping of various governmentality arrangements, in which institutional critique should orient itself today, within the art field and beyond it.

Yet if every form of historiography must ultimately be regarded as an institutional practice itself and an "outside the institution" cannot simply be presumed, but rather questions must be raised about the possibilities of a transformation of institutional practices, how can an alternative to canonization be imagined that is not a counter-canonization? One possibility certainly consists in a *political* analysis of the respective constellation, in which

institutional critique is articulated. This means assuming a perspective which takes into account the specific functionality of the art field within the concrete social-political context, ranging beyond the self-referential structures of this field, and which also includes a view to the changes, to which this functionality and thus the conditions of critique are subjected. Here I would like to propose a somewhat different approach, however, which does not contradict the first at all, but should rather be appended to it: an approach that envisions "critique" less in keeping with the model of a *judgement structure* (roughly speaking, in other words, a subject that *positions* itself *vis-à-vis* the criticized conditions), but rather with the model of a practice (meaning a subject that *is involved* and *involves itself* in a specific way *in* the criticized conditions).

Perhaps too little attention has previously been given to the fact that Foucault – where he talks about "suppressed knowledges", the "local discursivities" that are denigrated by the dominant discourse – describes these forms of knowledge as, among others, "differential knowledge"[13]. What does the notion of differentiality refer to here? On the one hand certainly to the resistiveness of this knowledge, to the fact that "it owes its force to the sharpness with which it enters into opposition with everything around it". On the other hand, however, it also refers to this knowledge being differential *in itself* (also self-pluralizing for this reason), to the fact that it cannot be "transposed into unanimity" – even though the Foucauldian genealogy itself, as a tactic of its description, exposes it to a certain danger of uniformed coding and recolonization[14]. Not least of all, this knowledge is *differential* because it does not allow itself, being resistive, to be subjected to any authorized discursive field, to any authorization by a dominant discourse, but instead recognizes the power effects found in the separation of knowledge into fields and in furnishing these fields

with discursive authorities, yet without composing itself into a new totality of knowledge. Hence as plural knowledge it also does not "organize" itself under a unified form, but rather in an open, non-dialectical game of concurrence. For precisely this reason, the Foucauldian genealogy can be concerned with "preparing a historical knowledge of struggles and introducing this knowledge into current tactics"[15].

The struggles that Foucault was specifically thinking of in the mid-seventies and through which "since ten, fifteen years [...] it has become possible to criticize things, institutions, practices, discourses to a tremendous and overflowing extent"[16], were particularly those of anti-psychiatry, attacks on gender hierarchies and sexual morals, and on the legal and penal apparatus. Why should we not append the battles of institutional critique practices to this list (it is not a coincidence that Robert Smithson compares the "cells" of the museums with those of "asylums and prisons" in the passage quoted above ...)? What could come into view through this kind of perspective is not so much – or at least not solely – the question of the respective critical assessment of art institutions, and certainly not of a canon, but rather an open field of a knowledge of action, a practical knowledge that rejects reintegration into the form of ends specific to art and in which the differentiality of institutional critique is actualized. We find it in the most diverse tactics of context politicization, self-masking, alienation, parody, the situation-specific refraction of themes, research, discursive and material context production, in self-institutionalization, in production that starts with social interaction, or even simply in a more or less developed renegade position.

A historiography and investigation of institutional critique could be oriented to these practices, if the aim is to introduce this knowledge into current tactics.

[1]An example that is – at least at first glance – outside the art field, and which also indicates the background of these reflections (namely Walter Benjamin's essay "On the Critique of Violence"): Pursuing the end of justice under the form of law, in other words as a legal end, means nothing more than considering it (legally) capable of generalization, whereby the form of law is placed beyond dispute both at the level of the means (legal claims, laws, etc.) and at the level of the ends (e.g. the non-contradictory regulation of human affairs).

[2]Cf. (also for the following quotations): I. Graw, "Jenseits der Institutionskritik", in: *Texte zur Kunst*, September 2005, Vol. 59, p. 47.

[3]On the distinction between creative competence and contemplation in the bourgeois modern art dispositive, cf.: S. Nowotny, "Polizierte Betrachtung. Zur Funktion und Funktionsgeschichte von Ausstellungstexten", in: schnittpunkt / B. Jaschke / Ch. Martinz-Turek / N. Sternfeld (Ed.), *Wer spricht? Autorität und Autorschaft in Ausstellungen*, Vienna: Turia + Kant 2005, 72-92.

[4]I. Graw, "Jenseits der Institutionskritik", p. 41.

[5]Ibid., p. 43.

[6] R. Smithson, "Cultural confinement", in: Ch. Kravagna / Kunsthaus Bregenz (ed.), *The Museum as Arena. Artists on Institutional Critique*, Cologne: König 2001, p. 16 f., here: p. 16.

[7] Ibid.

[8] A. Piper, "Power Relations within Existing Art Institutions", in: *The Museum as Arena. Artists on Institutional Critique*, op. cit., p. 50 f., here: p. 51.

[9]C. Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals. Inside Public Art Museums*, London / New York: Routledge 1995.

[10]T. Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum. History, Theory, Politics*, London / New York: Routledge 1995.

[11]Here I refer again to my previously mentioned text "Polizierte Betrachtung", especially p. 80-85, and on the historical political discussion of the further context of a "politics of culture" instructed by police science, to S. Nowotny, "'Kultur' und Machtanalyse", in: S. Nowotny / M. Staudigl (Ed.), *Grenzen des Kulturkonzepts. Meta-Genealogien*, Vienna: Turia + Kant 2003, p. 35-56.

[12]... for example due to the growing divergence between political economy and nation-state frameworks.

[13]Cf. M. Foucault, *In Verteidigung der Gesellschaft. Vorlesungen am Collège de France (1975-76)*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1999, p. 16.

[14]Cf. ibid., p. 21.

[15]Ibid., p. 17.

[16]Ibid., p. 13