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# **DEAD END, SOPHISTICATED ENDGAME STRATEGY, OR A THIRD WAY? INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE'S ACADEMIC PARADOXES AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES.**

In 2006, JRP/Ringier published an anthology entitled *Institutional Critique and After* edited by John C. Welchman. This was followed in 2009 by another anthology titled *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings*, edited by Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, published by MIT Press. These important collections of historical and contemporary articles represent the academic consolidation of a sub-discipline—an assimilation that highlights an important set of paradoxes and contradictions concerning institutional critique's own institutionalization since the 1960s.

The Preface to the M.I.T. anthology cautions: "Needless to say, we are well aware that to put together an anthology of institutional critique is to *institutionalize* institutional critique and therefore is fraught with self-contradictions from the beginning.

To a certain extent, many of the criticisms articulated in these writings and projects could be levelled at this very volume, and we bear full responsibility for our selections and organization." It also acknowledges, "... our primary ambition has been to give as rich a sense as possible of the breadth and depth of institutional critique rather than imposing a narrow outline. We have felt it particularly important to plan the volume as a guide, a resource, a base for further work and reading, as well as a self-contained book."<sup>1</sup> These sentences point to the existence of an implicit academic frame of reference that links editors, publication and audience together. The first sign of this frame is the publisher's name: M.I.T. Press. The second and third signs are the titles and the systems of references that bolster the observations and arguments presented in the anthology's introductory essays.<sup>2</sup> Welchman's preface and introduction have no references at all, but the information they supply leads to the same conclusion concerning the JRP/Ringier anthology's built-in audience profile and its connections to the university system.

## **What's in a name?**

The neutral title of the M.I.T. anthology places the editors, their observations and comments at a comfortable distance from the contradictions and double binds of institutional critique's achievements, failures and defeats 'on the ground.' This detachment is publicized by the titles of the two introductions: 'institutions, critique, and institutional critique' (Alberro's critical overview) and 'what was institutional critique?' (Stimson's ironically toned, philosophically-based historical review).

Titular neutrality is synchronized with the editors' "primary ambition ... to give as rich a sense as possible of the breadth and depth of institutional critique rather than imposing a narrow outline," and it tends, conveniently, to neutralize the candidly acknowledged possibility that their anthology could also easily be subject to a form of institutional critique. Distance provides the necessary objectivity that is promoted by a panoramic point of view, a measure of the anthology's authenticity that is rooted in the volume's comprehensive assessment of institutional critique's history and range of activities. Objectivity produces, in its turn, the illusion that the editors' mandate exists beyond any moral or historico-critical imperative to address the anthology's own invisible institutional framework. This neutrality and the editors' confession that "we bear full responsibility for our selections and organization" tend to neutralize the political and ideological implications of the hierarchy between those that choose (under the guidance of acknowledged advisors) and those that have been chosen to be included in the book.<sup>3</sup> They suggest, moreover, that the M.I.T. anthology functions as a compact, mobile emissary of a new and for the most part invisible institutional authority—a power that has not previously been acknowledged by the artists engaged in traditional museum or gallery directed forms of institutional critique.

## **In the name of the university**

The university also occupies a central—and openly acknowledged—position in the production and publication of *Institutional Critique and After*. The preface and introduction to this book turn out to be rich sources of information on the events leading up to this anthology's publication and their academic frame of reference. What is inadvertently or unconsciously occluded in the case of the M.I.T. Press publication is clearly and innocently acknowledged in the case of the JRP/Ringier volume.

*Institutional Critique and After* was the end product of a Southern California Consortium of Art Schools (SoCCAS) symposium that was held on May 21<sup>st</sup>, 2005 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The publication was the second in the SoCCAS symposia series. John C. Welchman's Preface presents information on the symposium's multifaceted institutional infrastructure and the range of people involved in its development and presentation. He lists the symposium's SoCCAS funding sources and notes that the symposium was hosted by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.<sup>4</sup>

The SoCCAS symposium is the product of an academic culture. The range of speakers presented in *Institutional Critique and After*—the artists, scholars and museum professionals that described their positions and exchanged their ideas—is a testimony not only to the diversity of professional interest in this topic, but it is also an example of the synergy between academic and artistic cultures that exists in the art world today. As this case suggests, there is an intellectual cohesion between the various representatives of an institutionalized art world where the distinction between artists and traditional academics is blurred by the fact that they both work in a common environment and, increasingly, refer to common theories and sources of information. Undergraduate and graduate students are the raw materials that are processed by the university system to become, in the case of the art world, the next generation of art professionals.<sup>5</sup> While it is easy to retort that there are a significant number of art schools in the SoCCAS consortium, the fact that they are associated in a common project to produce academic symposia and books is a sign of their collective desire to explore prestigious, academically sanctioned topics related to the visual arts. This type of consolidation illustrates the way visual practices are being increasingly framed by academic topics of inquiry that include not only the history of art but, increasingly, a contemporary art history that is almost in synchronicity with the present—an extraordinarily audacious and defiant academic tour de force.

*Institutional Critique and After's* historical frame of reference stretches from the 1960s to 2005, but its later decades were considered from the optic of a "contemporary reassessment."<sup>6</sup> As Welchman points out, "... Institutional Critique has been vigorously reoriented in recent years to address issues such as site-specificity, globalization, and the relation of visual culture to urban and metropolitan environments."<sup>7</sup> His list does not include the university or education. However, if one considers the book itself as an extension not only of the symposium but also of the university system that created the economic conditions for the symposium's existence as well as supplying most of its intellectual raw material in the form of speakers, then the book can also be considered, as I have already suggested in the case of the M.I.T. anthology, to be an autonomous institutional site in itself, and thus worthy of critical investigation in these terms.

## **Dead end or sophisticated endgame strategy?**

The dissemination, reformulation or subversion of the practice of institutional critique (it depends on how one views the changes) has important consequences on its meaning, strategies and targets; and it raises an interesting question:

Is it possible that there is considerable symbolic and real capital invested in the ongoing viability and 'critical health' of this practice because it has been perceived by artists, curators and academics to be an indispensable extension of the socio-political project of social transformation pursued in various ways by the avant-garde throughout the twentieth century? Clearly as Michael Asher's, Daniel Buren's and Hans Haacke's works suggest, early practitioners of institutional critique had no real intention of stepping outside of the boundaries and contradictions of the art world. Their objective was to continue to point to these contradictions—to raise consciousness—and in doing so to continue to produce difficult, sometimes complex and contradictory work. Thus the informal movement's principal historical achievement is linked to its longevity—its ability to continue to exist in a perpetual condition of articulating practices in double-bind situations vis-à-vis its own logical conditions of existence. No longer interested in the most radical and dangerous of the early twentieth century avant-garde's socio-political projects—revolutionary change in the case of the constructivists, for example—1960s and 1970s practitioners of what would later be recognized as belonging to a tradition of institutional critique were more interested in probing the art world's institutional limits, which they managed to strategically define in terms of architectural, socio-economic and political contradictions.<sup>8</sup> This allowed them to simultaneously redefine the nature and functions of the artist and artwork while astutely sidestepping the dangerous questions of co-optation or long-term vs. short-

term cultural change.<sup>9</sup> In their place, the one-month window of opportunity promoted by conventional exhibition cycles, proved, and continues to prove to be the most efficient way of maximizing short-term analysis. Indeed, analysis—an academic custom par excellence—became the dominant *modus operandi* for these early practitioners of institutional critique. In this sense, the window of opportunity provided by the exhibition was never really questioned and therefore the exhibition economy escaped critical investigation. Fixed cycles of varying length are at the foundation of the art world's exhibition economy and they continue to dictate the way that information is presented by artists as well as the pace of change that the art world is willing to tolerate. The useful and clever approaches developed by artists like Buren ensured that they were able to continue to produce work indefinitely without facing the possibility of exclusion, early retirement, self effacement, or even occlusion since the phenomena of institutional paradoxes and blatant contradictions (whether they existed in a museum, public or private gallery) was a subject matter that was inexhaustible. It was only a question of choosing one's object of analysis and ensuring that one was well integrated into the exhibition cycle from one season to another.<sup>10</sup>

relatively free of guilt. However, if one probes those paradoxes in terms of the relationship between the work of art, the art world's economy and the positions that it and its author occupy within this economy, then the story is more complex and disturbing—at least for the viewer who is interested in pursuing institutional critique's analytical possibilities to their paradoxical and self-neutralizing ends. A critical, institutionally-directed artistic gesture can, therefore, be judged, in this context, to represent a theoretical and practical dead end or it can be accepted as the product of a sophisticated end-game strategy. However, in each case, one is confronted with the *continuous* possibility of institutional critique's extinction, a demise that is perpetually deferred through the tacit parasitic agreement that exists between institution and artist. In contrast, there is another alternative, another vantage point that might provide a different and more promising perspective on this paradox.

### Third way

The two anthologies are useful and definitive, but they also function as bookends to a marginal tradition in the visual arts. Although they do not contain the totality of knowledge about institutional critique, they conveniently signal its practical end by providing enough information to expose its unacknowledged terminal—if perpetual—institutional paradoxes. However, they also point to a new site of investigation that is already intellectually and economically invested in institutional critique's future



transformation in terms of what its members consider to be a 'realistic' theoretical and historical afterlife. If one accepts the practice's logical end (as opposed to its ongoing parasitic existence), then, in theory, this should also point to the atrophy of the unhealthy relationship between institution and artist, and the eventual institutional loss of control over the visibility and circulation of art works, the careers of their authors, and what the public understands as contemporary art or advanced culture. This is clearly not the case. Hence, the tacit theoretical/practical acceptance of the perpetual incoherence created by the parasitic coexistence of institutional critique's dead end/sophisticated endgame alternatives. In spite of this ongoing incoherence, the two volumes provide another way out by inadvertently pointing to an invisible yet ubiquitous institution that artists have not acknowledged and critically addressed in terms of the guerrilla tactics that they have adopted in their investigations of, and confrontations with the monolithic, increasingly inventive and aesthetically challenging institutions that contain or frame their works and practices. This other institution is the university with its intellectual class system and increasingly 'hip' and therefore fashion-conscious ideas (in the case of art, its array of disciplines and sub-disciplines).

The opening paragraph of Alberro's introduction to the M.I.T. anthology inadvertently exposes the university's ambiguous historical position and relationship to power, knowledge, the public archive and the art institution:

### Tacit relationships and continuous possibilities

If one accepts the institutional paradoxes of contemporary art at face value, then one can exit from an exhibition, as one emerges from a confessional,

Like the institutions of the university and the library or public archive, the art institution was advanced by Enlightenment philosophy as dualistic. The aesthetic, discursively realized in salons and museums through the process of critique, was coupled with a promise: the production of public exchange, of a public sphere, of a public subject. It also functioned as a form of self-imagining, as an integral element in the constitution of bourgeois identity.<sup>11</sup> This would have been a perfect introduction to a thorough and critical assessment of the tradition of institutional critique. It could also have served as an initial frame of reference for a self-reflexive analysis of the M.I.T. publication's relationship to the university: the institution that educated Alberro and Stimson as well most of the artists, curators and museum directors, etc. that operate in the art world today.<sup>12</sup> However, Alberro was not really conscious of the radical implications of his opening paragraph. Instead he went on to provide the reader with a critical overview of the transformations in institutional critique from the 1960s to the present. His historically justified focus on the museum, and his distinction between immanent and prescriptive facets of institutional critique's engagements with that institution, provide the reader with important information and tools of analysis. Perhaps, one should ask for nothing more in the introduction to an anthology of artists' writings of this kind. However, one can argue that the question of the viability and/or contradictions of the tradition of institutional critique has lost all meaning in the current context of art production, and that this neutralization is the product

but they are more likely to meet with complete disregard and disavowal. Piper calls on artists to respond to these adverse conditions by producing work that can be effectively inserted into fields outside of the institution of art and therefore can survive without the support of the art market. But to produce such work, artists must first rigorously question the constellation of elements that go into their own self-construction as artistic producers.<sup>13</sup>

He observes, moreover, that Piper, Mel Ramsden and Martha Rosler "...stress that an education emphasizing the predicaments artists face is important to any attempt to transform the conditions of artistic production, exhibition, and distribution"—although one notes, again, that the objective of this education was not a critical reassessment of the university (as opposed to the museum, etc.) in critical institutional terms.<sup>14</sup> In spite of this remark, Alberro continues to provide the reader with an overview of the anthologies content and various authors' contributions to institutional critique.

A process of structural occlusion associated with the artist's education is also exhibited in Stimson's introduction, which is caste in philosophical as opposed to sociological or grassroots artistic terms. He notes, for example, that "... the category that concerns us is not simply reducible to the social and economic institutions that house and support visual art—museums, galleries, individual and corporate art collections, universities, academic presses, art magazines, and the like."<sup>15</sup> This category is Peter Bürger's "institution of art."<sup>16</sup> What is of interest in this statement, is the way that Stimson reduces



of the absence of a critical perspective in relation to the artist's contemporary academic education.

The first and most important context for the development of strategies and tactics related to the analysis and criticism of the institutions subtending art production and reception, the economies which bind them together and through them to society at large, is no longer the museum or the art gallery (although they remain major players in the art world along with auction houses). The new context is the university because it serves as the site for the production of artists, art historians and critics, their visual works, practices, theories, histories, book manuscripts and articles.

An immanent or prescriptive critique of the university would destroy the historical *raison d'être* of both anthologies, but the absence of this possibility raises serious questions about the viability of contemporary post- or neo-institutional critical practices. Alberro notes in reference to one of Adrian Piper's contributions to *Institutional Critique*: "What particularly troubles her [Piper] is that the critic comes to control the meaning of artworks, and in turn the artist's career."

Underpinning this assessment is the belief that under the prevailing conditions of the institution of art, those whose writings on art are most public work in tandem with collectors and the market. All of these constituencies demand that the artist remain within a well-established formula and develop a signature style. At best, departures from the norm are reprimanded by negative reviews,

art's institutional matrix to a flat line of equivalence, where hierarchies and economies are equalized and then replaced—from an explanatory point of view—with the products of philosophy's meta-disciplinary powers of abstract explanation. This illustrious and epistemologically engaged academic discipline is somehow levitated from its own disciplinary matrix and sociological history and is accorded a neutral panoptic explanatory role in the construction of his argument. This is an exemplary role for a discipline that is accorded a neutral, collectively validated social function. But this role has not been authorized in this case. It is simply an editorial artifice that masks its author's own institutional roots and contradictions.

One can accept this state of affairs or one can start to question the implicit hierarchy and structure of Stimson's introduction to an anthology of writings on institutional critique by exposing its relationship to an emerging twenty-first century university-centered art world. The author points out, for example, that the "... combination of a diminution of public institutionality and an intensification of private institutionality in the wake of the 1960s is part of a larger process of postmodernization tied to the longer history of the cold war..." and that "...it summoned a loss of purpose for institutional critique at the moment of its inception..." which "... was to hold public or quasi-public institutions—institutions like museums, universities, and governments—accountable to their public mission, or at least to a public mission for art"<sup>17</sup> Note the proximity—contiguity—of the museum and university in Stimson's short

rasheed aareen • fareed armaly • art workers' coalition • michael asher  
gregory battcock • osvaldo mateo boglione • gregg bordowitz  
wieslaw borowski • aldo bortolotti • marcel broodthaers • bureau  
d'études • daniel buren • graciela carnevale • critical art en-  
semble • christopher d'arcangelo • mark dion • maria eichhorn  
eduardo favario • andrea fraser • renée green • groupe de  
recherche d'art visuel • group material • guerrilla art action  
group • guerrilla girls • hans haacke • institute for applied au-  
tonomy • allan kaprow • john knight • silvia kolbowski • barbara  
kruger • steve lambert • laibach • louise lawler • julio le parc  
little warsaw • lea lublin • olivier mosset • christian philipp  
müller • nils norman • nsk • michel parmentier • adrian piper  
hanna ptaszkowska • mel ramsden • repohistory • martha rosler  
®™Mark • andreas siekmann • robert smithson • hito steyerl  
mariusz tchorek • rirkrit tiravaneja • niele toroni • mierle  
laderman ukeles • fred wilson • wochenklausur • the yes men

## institutional critique

an anthology of artists' writings

edited by alexander alberro and blake stimson

Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, *Institutional critique, an Anthology of Artists' Writings*, published by MIT Press, 2009.

list of examples and the pivotal place that the university occupies between the museum and government. In an earlier list that was composed of "museums, galleries, individual and corporate art collections, universities, academic presses, art magazines" the university occupies an equally central position. Perhaps this is simply a coincidence, but it is nevertheless an interesting one. For a reader can appreciate, from another less spectacular viewpoint than the one promoted by philosophy, how important the university is in the landscape in which art, the artist, art institutions and institutional critique cohabit and interact. This position is exposed in Stimson's concluding paragraphs where he discusses an exchange between Lucien Goldmann, Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan around a slogan that had been displayed on a blackboard at the Sorbonne University during the 1968 student uprisings in Paris. The slogan proclaimed, "Structures do not take to the streets." As reported by Stimson,

Goldmann had used the statement to trigger a debate at the conclusion of Foucault's 1969 lecture "What is an Author?" that he attended. Goldmann's retort to Foucault's position was summary: "It is never structures that make history; it is men." Foucault responded by side stepping the issue. He simply disowned the term 'structure.' However, Lacan, a fellow member of the audience, responded to Goldmann's angry declaration by stating "I do not believe that it is at all legitimate to have written that structures do not take to the streets because, if there is one thing demonstrated by the events of May, it is precisely that structures did take to the streets." Concerning the academic location of the anonymous proclamation and its role in events of May 1968, Lacan went on to observe: it "proves nothing other than, simply, that very often, even most often, what is internal to what is called action is that it does not know itself."<sup>18</sup>

For Stimson, the exchange illustrates three “philosophies of history,” the first action based (Goldmann), the second structural (Lacan) and the third strategic and positional (Foucault). However, he goes on to argue that these philosophies omitted to allow for “...a meaningful critical role for institutions ...,” in particular for the “...institution of art as the *locus classicus* of the public sphere.”<sup>19</sup> Stimson’s focus on this omission makes no sense, if one takes the university into account as one of the primary frames of reference for the *production* of art today (as opposed to its presentation or display). If this is the case, then the academic context of the Goldmann-Foucault-Lacan exchange, and its strategic concluding position in Stimson’s introduction, point to another influential “*locus classicus* of the public sphere” in contemporary art: the university lecture hall. After all, the exchange did take place in a public space, in the presence of three mythic founding figures of contemporary theory, and in the context of an ancient and prestigious educational institution. This critique might seem to be excessive or even blatantly erroneous given Stimson’s concluding call to preserve “... the institutionality of critique...” because it “... is the great modernist promise that the art practice of institutional critique held out in the rising tide of the various postmodernisms from ultra-left to ultra-right since the 1960s.” However, Stimson’s final attempt to reactivate institutional critique’s traditional *raison d’être*—“It is the memory of that historically specific charter that might serve us now”—is still born.<sup>20</sup> It represents a strategic dead end because the university and its disciplinary apparatus have not been acknowledged as governing forces in the theoretical and practical formation of the contemporary artist and artwork.

If one is skeptical about the fundamental formative and governing role of the academy in today’s art world and if one is not convinced about the critical importance of redirecting the focus, tools and strategies of the practitioners of institutional critique onto this ancient yet omnipotent social institution, one has only to read Welchman’s introduction to *Institutional Critique and After*. I have already noted some of the logistical elements and economic considerations that combined to produce the conference and book. What I have not discussed is one of the project’s more innocent, yet audacious activities: the commissioning of works of art to fit in with the conference’s themes. The conference organizers “commissioned a series of projects by artists who have worked to both extend and critically disrupt the legacies of Institutional Critique or who have been associated with some of its commitments or languages.”<sup>21</sup> This activity placed the conference in the position of a gallery or museum and its organizers in the position of a ‘gallerist’ or curator. A noteworthy sign of the academy’s transparency and its powerful ability to neutralize the possibilities of criticism is to be found in the fact that none of the artists who were invited actually chose to examine the conference’s own logic and contradictions in connection with its topic. Inversely the conference’s lack of self-reflexivity is signalled by the fact that it did not address its own contradictions vis-à-vis its decision to commission works. Faced with these contradictions, one has no problem in appropriating Piper’s concept of “aesthetic acculturation” and redirecting it towards a new object of critique where it might function in the guise of ‘academic’ or ‘theoretical acculturation’ as a means of promoting analysis, criticism and consciousness raising. But this is only one way to link up with the artistic practices of the 1960s and 1970s. Haacke provides another route, as does many other artists’ strategies and works of the period. Provided that alternatives are directed towards a self-reflexive ‘analysis’ of the university, its educational functions, systems of acculturation (disciplinary models and methods), economic and political affiliations in critical-institutional terms. It is also important to point out that, from the viewpoint of art and its practitioners, the tools of institutional critique must not only be deployed in the context of classic disciplines like art history and the various forms of studio arts, it must also be deployed in the context of the new post-disciplines of Cultural Studies, Postcolonial and Visual Studies and the more recent finely tuned sub-disciplines of Art History and Theory or Critical Theory and the Arts, etc. This is not an easy task. It involves a reassessment and reformulation of the role of critical theory and its socio-political functions in the visual arts, the university and society.

Some final words of caution: The purpose of this discussion is not to unilaterally denounce the university’s role in the education of the contemporary artist

(although there is much more to be said on this topic). The objective is, on the contrary, to address some of the existing paradoxes in the role and function of institutional critique in an art world whose center of gravity has been displaced from the museum and gallery to the university.

David Tomas

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#### Notes

- 1 *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists’ Writings*, Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson eds. Cambridge, Mass. and London, England, 2009, Preface, np.
- 2 *Ibid.*, pp.18-19, 40-42.
- 3 *Ibid.*, Preface. The advisors included Nora M. Alter, Uta Meta Bauer, Sabine Breitweiser, Ron Clark, Andrea Giunta, Isabelle Graw, James Meyer, Andrzej Przywara, and Stephen Wright.
- 4 John C. Welchman, Preface. *Institutional Critique and After*, Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2006, pp. 8-9. The major funding source was the SoCCAS consortium. It was composed of the following institutions: Art Center College of Art and Design, Pasadena; California Institute of the Arts, Valencia; Claremont Graduate School; Otis College of Art and Design; University of California, Irvine; University of California, Los Angeles; University of California, San Diego; and the University of Southern California. Another source of funding was the Fellows of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.
- 5 Welchman, Preface. *Institutional Critique*, p. 9.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 See, for example, the canonical works of three of the founding fathers of institutional critique: Asher, Buren and Haacke.
- 9 *Ibid.* For examples from a later generation see Andrea Fraser, Fred Wilson, Mark Dion.
- 10 The careers of Haacke and Buren are wonderful examples of the kinds of useful careers that sophisticated and politically attuned artists can pursue in the art world’s densely populated institutional environment.
- 11 Alberro, *Institutional Critique*, p. 3.
- 12 Alberro obtained his Ph.D. Northwestern University in 1996 and his M.A. degree in Art History from the University of British Columbia in 1990 as well as a B.A. from the same university. Stimson obtained his Ph.D. from Cornell University in 1998, an M.F.A. in Sculpture from Tufts University and the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston in 1992. He was a Fellow in Studio Art at the Whitney Independent Study Program, New York in 1990-91, and he obtained a B.A. in Religious Studies from Middlebury College in 1982. Although Stimson’s education is dualist in form, his affiliations are clearly academic.
- 13 Alberro, *Institutional Critique*, pp. 10-11. It is important to note that the same can be said of the relationship between academic theorists and artists today.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- 15 Stimson, *Institutional Critique*, p. 28.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 33.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 39. Stimson quotes for Didier Eribon, *Michel Foucault*, Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press, 1991, pp. 210-211.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 Welchman, *Institutional Critique*, p. 19. The artists were Monica Bonvicini, Martin Sastre, Javier Téllez and the Guerrilla Girls.