

From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique

Andrea Fraser

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

In the context of museum exhibitions and art-history symposia such as these, one increasingly finds institutional critique accorded the unquestioning respect often granted artistic phenomena that have achieved a certain historical status. That recognition, however, quickly becomes an occasion to dismiss the critical claims associated with it, as resentment of its perceived exclusivity and high-handedness rushes to the surface. How can artists who have become art-historical institutions themselves claim to critique the institution of art? Michael Kimmelman provided a ready example of such skepticism in his critical *New York Times* review of Buren’s Guggenheim show. While the

“critique of the institution of the museum” and the “commodity status of art” were “counterestablishment ideas when, like Mr. Buren, they emerged forty or so years ago,” Kimmelman contends, Buren is now an “official artist of France, a role that does not seem to trouble some of his once-radical fans. Nor, apparently, does the fact that his brand of institutional analysis . . . invariably depends on the largesse of institutions like the Guggenheim.” Kimmelman goes on to compare Buren unfavorably to Christo and Jeanne-Claude, who “operate, for the most part, outside traditional institutions, with fiscal independence, in a public sphere beyond the legislative control of art experts.”¹

Further doubts about the historic and present-day efficacy of institutional critique arise with laments over how bad things have become in an art world in which MOMA opens its new temporary-exhibition galleries with a corporate collection, and art hedge funds sell shares of single paintings. In these discussions, one finds a certain nostalgia for institutional critique as a now-anachronistic artifact of an era before the corporate mega-museum and the 24/7 global art market, a time when artists could still conceivably take up a critical position against or outside the institution. Today, the argument goes, there no longer is an outside. How, then, can we imagine, much less accomplish, a critique of art institutions when museum and market have grown into an all-encompassing apparatus





of cultural reification? Now, when we need it most, institutional critique is dead, a victim of its success or failure, swallowed up by the institution it stood against.

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

I recently discovered that none of the half-dozen people often considered the “founders” of “institutional critique” claim to use the term. I first used it in print in a 1985 essay on Louise Lawler, “In and Out of Place,” when I ran off the now-familiar

list of Michael Asher, Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, and Hans Haacke, adding that, “while very different, all these artists engage(d) in institutional critique.”²

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

By 1985, I had also read Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, which was published in Germany in 1974 and finally appeared in English translation in 1984. One of Bürger’s central theses is that “with the historical avant-garde movements, the social subsystem that is art enters the stage of self-criticism. Dadaism . . . no longer criticizes schools that preceded it, but criticizes art as an institution, and the course its development took in bourgeois society.”⁴

Having studied with Buchloh as well as Craig Owens, who edited my essay on Lawler, I think it’s quite possible that one of them let “institutional critique” slip out. It’s also possible that their students in the mid-’80s at the School of Visual Arts and the Whitney Independent Study Program (where Haacke and Martha Rosler also lectured)—including Gregg Bordowitz, Joshua Decker, Mark Dion, and me—just started using the term as a shorthand for “the critique of institutions” in our after-class debates. Not having found an earlier published appearance of the term, it is curious to consider that the established canon we thought we were receiving may have just been forming at the time. It could even be that our very reception of ten- or fifteen-year-old works, reprinted texts, and tardy translations (by the likes of Douglas Crimp, Asher, Buren, Haacke, Rosler, Buchloh, and Bürger), and our perception of those works and texts as canonical, was a central moment in the process of institutional critique’s so-called institutionalization. And so I find myself enmeshed in the contradictions and complicities, ambitions and ambivalence that institutional critique is often accused of, caught between the self-flattering possibility that I was the first person to put the term in print, and the critically shameful prospect of having played a role in the reduction of certain radical practices to a pithy catchphrase, packaged for co-optation.

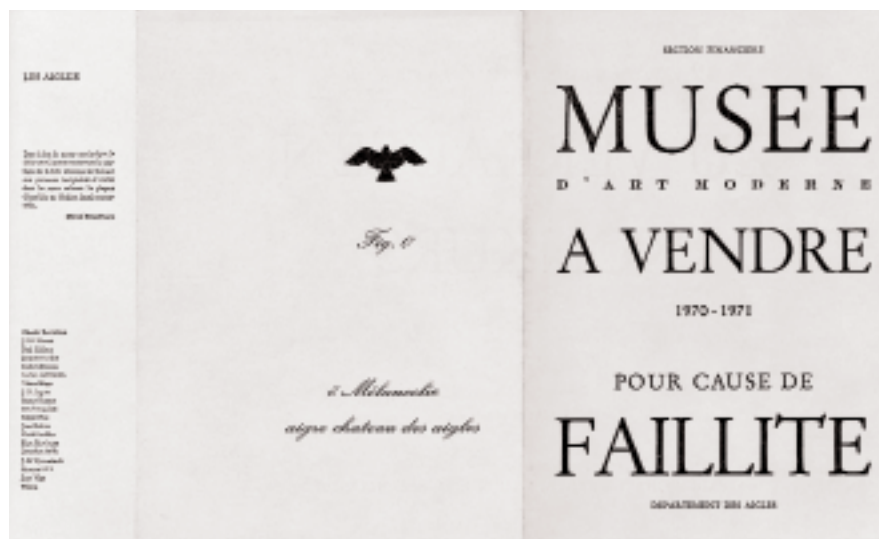
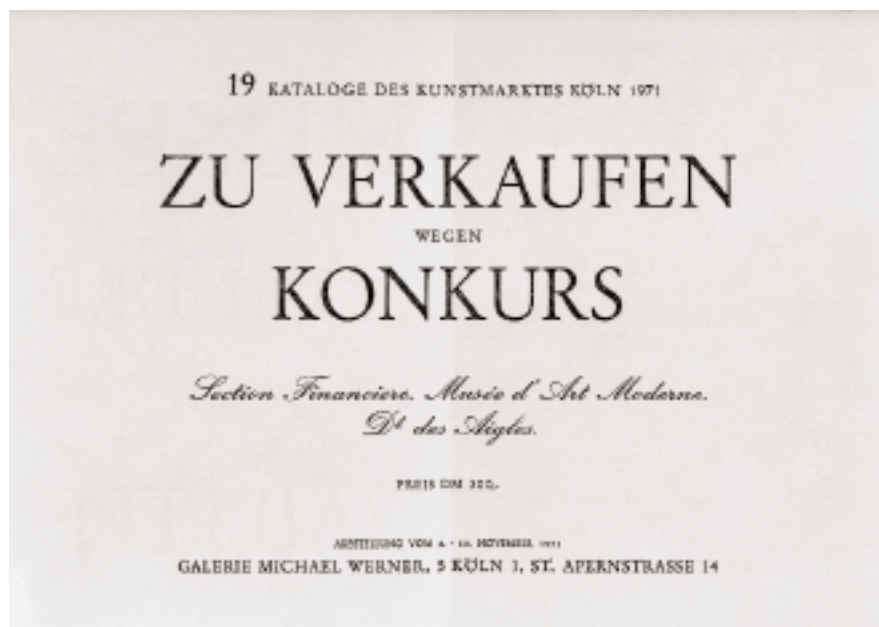
If, indeed, the term “institutional critique” emerged as shorthand for “the critique of institutions,” today

Opposite page: View of “The Michael Asher Lobby,” Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 1984. Photo: Michael Asher. This page: Daniel Buren, *Photo-Souvenir: Peinture-Sculpture*, 1971. Installation view, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

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

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

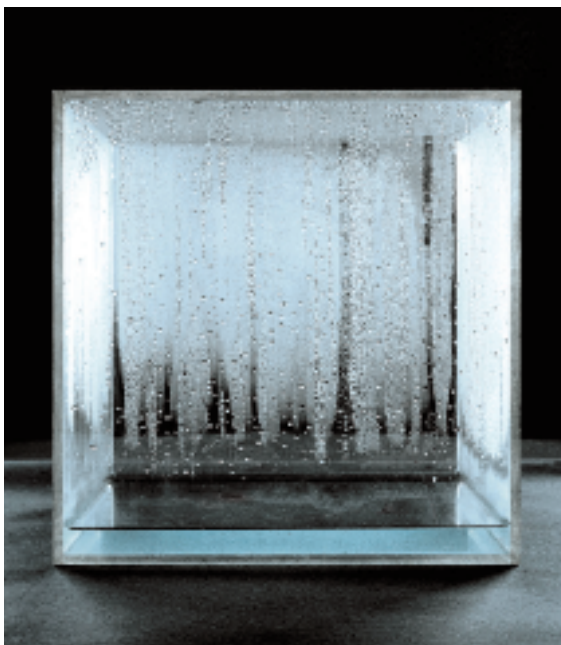
Indeed, the critique most consistently in evidence in the post-studio work of Buren and Asher is aimed at artistic practice itself (a point that may not have been lost on other artists in the Sixth Guggenheim International Exhibition, since it was they, not museum officials or trustees, who demanded the removal of Buren’s work in 1971). As their writings make clear, the institutionalization of art in museums or its com-



modification in galleries cannot be conceived of as the co-optation or misappropriation of studio art, whose portable form predestines it to a life of circulation and exchange, market and museological incorporation. Their rigorously site-specific interventions developed as a means not only to reflect on these and other institutional conditions but also to resist the very forms of appropriation on which they reflect. As transitory, these works further acknowledge the historical specificity of any critical intervention, whose effectiveness will always be limited to a particular time and place. Broodthaers, however, was the supreme master of performing critical obsolescence in his gestures of melancholic complicity. Just three years after founding the *Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* in his Brussels studio in 1968, he put his “museum fiction” up for sale, “for reasons of bankruptcy,” in a prospectus that served as a wrapper for the catalogue

This page: Marcel Broodthaers, *Musée d'Art Moderne à vendre—pour cause de faillite* (Museum of Modern Art for sale—for Reasons of Bankruptcy), 1970–71, dust jacket for catalogue of the Cologne Art Fair, recto and verso, offset print on paper, 12 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 17 $\frac{3}{4}$ ". Opposite page: Hans Haacke, *Condensation Cube*, 1963–65, acrylic, water, and climate in location of display, 11 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 11 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 11 $\frac{1}{8}$ ". Photo: Hans Haacke. © Artists Rights Society (ARS).

Moving from a substantive understanding of “the institution” as specific places, organizations, and individuals to a conception of it as a social field, the question of what is inside and what is outside becomes much more complex.



of the Cologne Art Fair—with a limited edition sold through Galerie Michael Werner. Finally, the most explicit statement of the elemental role of artists in the institution of art may have been made by Haacke. “‘Artists,’” he wrote in 1974, “as much as their supporters and their enemies, no matter of what ideological coloration, are unwitting partners. . . . They participate jointly in the maintenance and/or development of the ideological make-up of their society. They work within that frame, set the frame and are being framed.”⁸

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

This conception of “institution” can be seen most clearly in the work of Haacke, who came to institutional critique through a turn from physical and environmental systems in the 1960s to social systems, starting with his gallery-visitor polls of 1969–73. Beyond the most encompassing list of substantive spaces, places, people, and things, the “institution” engaged by Haacke can best be defined as the network of social and economic relationships between them. Like his *Condensation Cube*, 1963–65, and his *MOMA-Poll*, 1970, the gallery and museum figure less as objects of critique themselves than as containers in which the largely abstract and invisible forces and relations that traverse particular social spaces can be made visible.⁹

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

the same sign, can change radically depending on where it is viewed.

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

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

What Asher thus demonstrated is that the institution of art is not only “institutionalized” in organizations like museums and objectified in art objects. It is also internalized and embodied in people. It is internalized in the competencies, conceptual models, and modes of perception that allow us to produce, write about, and understand art, or simply to recognize art as art, whether as artists, critics, curators, art historians, dealers, collectors, or museum visitors. And above all, it exists in the interests, aspirations, and criteria of value that orient our actions and define our sense of worth. These competencies and dispositions determine our own institutionalization as members of the field of art. They make up what Pierre Bourdieu called *habitus*: the “social made body,” the institution made mind.

There is, of course, an “outside” of the institution, but it has no fixed, substantive characteristics. It is only what, at any given moment, does not exist as



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

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

certainly does not denounce the art market but adapts to it. Such adaptation does not eradicate the idea of individual creativity, it affirms it, and the reason is the failure of the avant-gard[e].”¹¹

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

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

It’s not a question of being against the institution: We are the institution. It’s a question of what kind of institution we are, what kind of values we institutionalize, what forms of practice we reward, and what kinds of rewards we aspire to.

This page, left: **Michael Asher, *Installation Münster (Caravan)*, 1977.** Installation view, Skulptur Projekte in Münster, parking position fourth week (July 25–August 1), Alter Steinweg, across from Kiffe-Pavilion, parking meter no. 274 or 275. Photo: Rudolf Wakonig. Right: **Michael Asher, *Installation Münster (Caravan)*, 1987.** Installation view, Skulptur Projekte in Münster, parking position fourth week (June 29–July 6), Alter Steinweg, across from Kiffe-Pavilion, parking meter no. 2200. Photo: Christiane Forster. Opposite page, top: **Daniel Buren, *Photo-Souvenir: Untitled, work in situ*, 1969.** Installation view, Wide White Space, Antwerp. Bottom: **Hans Haacke, *MOMA-Poli*, 1970,** two acrylic ballot boxes with photoelectrically triggered counters, 40 x 20 x 10” each. Photo: Hans Haacke. © Artists Rights Society (ARS).

rise. All of which also increases the demand for the products and services of art professionals.

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

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

Representations of the “art world” as wholly distinct from the “real world,” like representations of the “institution” as discrete and separate from “us,” serve specific functions in art discourse. They maintain an imaginary distance between the social and economic interests we invest in through our activities and the euphemized artistic, intellectual, and even political “interests” (or disinterests) that provide those activities with content and justify their existence. And with

these representations, we also reproduce the mythologies of volunteerist freedom and creative omnipotence that have made art and artists such attractive emblems for neoliberalism’s entrepreneurial, “ownership-society” optimism. That such optimism has found perfect artistic expression in neo-Fluxus practices like relational aesthetics, which are now in perpetual vogue, demonstrates the degree to which what Bürger called the avant-garde’s aim to integrate “art into life praxis” has evolved into a highly ideological form of escapism. But this is not just about ideology. We are not only symbols of the rewards of the current regime: In this art market, we are its direct material beneficiaries.

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

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

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For notes, see page xxx.



RUNOVER

NOTES

1. Michael Kimmelman, “Tall French Visitor Takes up Residence in the Guggenheim,” *New York Times*, March 25, 2005.
2. Andrea Fraser, “In and Out of Place,” *Art in America*, June 1985, 124.
3. Benjamin Buchloh, “Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art,” *Artforum*, Sept. 1982, 48.
4. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 22.
5. Broodthaers quoted in Benjamin Buchloh, “Open Letters, Industrial Poems,” *October* 42 (Fall 1987): 71.
6. Daniel Buren, “The Function of the Museum,” in *Museums by Artists*, ed. A. A. Bronson and Peggy Gale (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1983), 58.
7. Daniel Buren, “The Function of the Studio,” in *Museums by Artists*, 61.
8. Hans Haacke, “All the Art That’s Fit to Show,” in *Museums by Artists*, 152.
9. In this, Haacke’s work parallels the theory of art as a social field developed by Pierre Bourdieu.
10. Daniel Buren, “Beware!” *Studio International*, March 1970, 101.
11. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 52–53.
12. Ibid., 54.