

# Institutions – between “Institutional Critique” and “Critical Institutions”

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*Sönke Gau*

“Even art has left the spaces of enclosure in order to enter into the open circuits of the bank.”<sup>1</sup>

Gilles Deleuze published this assertion in 1990, at a time during which the increasing heterogenization of and monetary influence on the art field and its institutions were just beginning to gain pace. Art objects have now become blue chips, speculative objects on the secondary market, and are often traded at prices far exceeding the acquisition budgets of public exhibition venues. Artists and curators are deemed role models of cognitive capitalism. When viewed historically, the art field, and with it conceptualizations of creativity, developed more at the margins of society—and is today “conquering” the center from there. Seemingly natural, creative skills mutate into contemporary subjects’ omnipresent social requirement profile. While the historical avant-gardes were almost unanimously critical of capitalism and fought for an art freed of purposes, it now seems as if precisely these avant-gardes achieved the opposite of what they once intended: Today, art’s functionlessness, as they envisioned, is seen as a prerequisite—not only for the marketing of art, but above all for the aestheticization of the commodity, which has become an imperative in our day and age. Thus, the longing for and the imperative of creativity coincide, with creativity turning into an economic resource that is both mobilized and exhausted by competition. Museums are increasingly dependent on financial support from businesses, particularly in the United States, and—as we have

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1 Gilles Deleuze, *Postscript on the Societies of Control*, p. 6.

seen—this support often comes from dubious sources.<sup>2</sup> Even if this development has not yet progressed to this extent in Europe, one can discern an increasing use of exhibitions and exhibition institutions as instruments in an ever more heated ideological battle for location policies and cultural values. Centers of contemporary art are at risk of becoming sites of right-wing populist propaganda, not only in Eastern Europe, something which will be examined in greater detail.<sup>3</sup>

It might be objected that museums, as places of “Culture,” representation and knowledge production, have always been contested fields of social (self-)understanding with the attendant mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion.<sup>4</sup> The fact that the critique of institutions is as old as the institutions themselves is revealed when taking a look at (art) history books: Even the Louvre, regarded as the first modern museum when it opened in 1793, was criticized from the outset.<sup>5</sup> In a long series of prominent critiques by Valéry, Proust and others, Adorno’s analogy between museum and mausoleum has become particularly well known in the German-language discourse. In his 1967 essay “Valéry Proust Museum” he wrote:

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- 2 On this aspect, see Robert Trafford’s contribution on the practice of Forensic Architecture in this publication.
  - 3 For example, the once renowned Ujazdowski Castle CCA in Warsaw has aligned itself with the values of the ruling populist “Law and Justice” party (PiS) that appointed him under the controversial director Piotr Bernatowicz. Since then, he has cancelled several, previously planned progressive projects, cut financial support to the institution’s critical art journal, and has implemented projects that spread xenophobia, exclusion and right-wing conservative propaganda.
  - 4 Tony Bennett, *The Exhibitionary Complex*.
  - 5 For example, the archaeologist, writer and art historian Antoine Quatremère de Quincy (1755–1849), who originally participated in the Louvre’s conception, was against the museum presenting artifacts from Napoleon’s raids. Quatremère de Quincy fundamentally opposed the decontextualization of artistic works from their environments of production and use—both through museums and the art market. In these cases, the affected objects would be reduced to the status of an artwork and become isolated, which would not only mean extracting them from their original religious, cultural, economic, geographic, and climatic context, but this would even amount to their destruction. A. Quatremère de Quincy: *Lettres sur le préjudice qu’occasionneraient aux Arts et à la Science, le déplacement des monumens de l’art de l’Italie, le démembrement de Écoles, et la spoliation de ses Collections, Galeries, Musées, &c.* The letters became famous under the name “Lettre à Miranda” (they were addressed to a general with this name) and were published for the first time in Paris; the publication mentioned is a reprint of the book version from 1836.

“The German word, ‘*museal*’ [‘*museumlike*’], has unpleasant overtones. It describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying. They owe their preservation more to historical respect than to the needs of the present. Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association. Museums are like the family sepulchres of works of art.”<sup>6</sup>

The “dying” of the objects in the museum as described is caused by its leveling effect. All objects brought there from their original contexts are transformed into works of art. The critique of this decontextualization is taken up by the historical avant-gardes who are intent on once again merging “art” and “life.”<sup>7</sup> Later, artistic institutional critique<sup>8</sup> decidedly dealt with the framework conditions of art institutions. Their traditional variants have, meanwhile, been canonized and have become fixed components of art history and the institution of art. However, this does not mean that institutional critique has fundamentally failed. Instead, one must start from the assumption that the different variants of institutional critique should not be exclusively understood as forming a defined genre or a part of the art-historical canon, but instead as a *method*<sup>9</sup> seeking to assert broader relevance beyond the artistic field, thereby pointing to an expanded field of possible actions.

Alongside the critique of museums, there were already early proposals as to how the alleged mausoleum could be revived. In 1929, Sigfried Giedion wrote in his essay “*Lebendige Museen*” (“Live Museum”) for the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* that:

“The crisis that has affected art in general is also tangible in the museum. One will have to demand that the museum integrates itself into life in a certain respect. One will demand that the collections of contemporary art establish ‘test laboratories’ of sorts, departments that lend a voice to the art movements currently being discussed.”<sup>10</sup>

6 Theodor W. Adorno, *Valéry Proust Museum*, p. 175.

7 Peter Bürger, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*.

8 For a genealogy of institutional critique, see, among others, Sønke Gau, *Institutionskritik als Methode*.

9 Andrea Fraser states that institutional critique should not be defined through an object—an institution, no matter how broadly it is understood. Instead, it can “only be defined as a *methodology of critically reflexive site-specificity*.” Andrea Fraser, *What is Institutional Critique?*, p. 305.

10 Sigfried Giedion, *Lebendige Museen*, p. 99.

Giedion regards the collaboration between Alexander Dorner and El Lissitzky to be a prime example of this approach. Dorner and El Lissitzky realized the “Kabinett der Abstrakten” (“Cabinet of Abstraction”) in the Provincial Museum in Lower Saxony between 1926 and 1928. It radically broke with the presentation concepts of modern art that had been customary of the time. The exhibition space’s alleged neutrality, owing to an idealistic aesthetics, and the passive juxtaposition of artwork and viewer geared toward contemplation were radically called into question and replaced by the concept of a dynamic exhibition space that aimed to activate and involve the viewers, who were hence to become *users*. Dorner wrote: “The new type of art museum must not only be an ‘art’ museum in the traditional static sense [...]. But the new type would be a kind of powerhouse, a producer of new energies.”<sup>11</sup> Later, talk of “powerhouses” and “test laboratories,” as demanded by Giedion and Dorner, always arose when progressive museum concepts were called for or designed. Following the continuous critique of the white cube, as described by Brian O’Doherty, for example,<sup>12</sup> further museum reforms were initiated in the wake of the protests, and curators emancipated themselves from the administrators of the collections and became authors.<sup>13</sup> However, the more intense collaborations between artists and curators, the emphasis on aspects of inter- and trans-disciplinarity, on performance and mediation, as well as on the dynamization of the exhibition space and the involvement of visitors in the production of meaning through art were only reflected much later in New Institutionalism; this took place from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s.<sup>14</sup>

One is faced with a contradictory picture when taking a look at the developments in the art field today, the forms of subjectivization,<sup>15</sup> the positioning of

11 Alexander Dorner, *the way beyond ‘art’*, p. 147.

12 See Brian O’Doherty, *Inside the White Cube*.

13 See Søren Grammel, *Ausstellungsautorenschaft*.

14 The concept goes back to Jonas Ekeberg, who was responsible for the issue of the periodical *Verksted* 1,2003, entitled “New Institutionalism” for the Office for Contemporary Art Norway, in which a number of progressive institutions and practices (the expansion of the institutional practice and forms of social commitment) were summarized under this keyword. For a genealogy of the history of New Institutionalism, see Sønke Gau, *Institutionskritik als Methode*, especially Chapter 9, *New Institutionalism*, p. 341–392, or Gabriel Flückiger, Lucie Kolb (eds.), *(New) Institution(alism)*, and James Voorhies (ed.), *What Ever Happened to New Institutionalism?*, with a reprint of *Verksted* 1,2003, by Jonas Ekeberg, which is out of print.

15 Katja Molis, *Kuratorische Subjekte*.

actors and the art institutions, primarily museums. What we can observe is the fundamental structural and thematic ambivalence of both art institutions and the activity of curating: Magnificent new museum buildings, by contemporary star architects, have become an important part of image campaigns in the international competition of cities hoping to recreate the so-called ‘Bilbao effect’. Museums and other public art institutions ought to be open to “democratic deviance,”<sup>16</sup> conflicts, and negotiation processes related to social diversity and the inclusion of marginalized groups in addition to being a neoliberal invocation as a location factor and a participatory and, at best, innovative site of encounter. While some call for the possibilities of activism<sup>17</sup> and others insist on the “radically democratic redefinition of the museum,”<sup>18</sup> examine “museum activism”<sup>19</sup> or advocate “curatorial activism,”<sup>20</sup> it is nonetheless conspicuous that the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, as well as the power and representation levels of many museums, remain startlingly persistent.

Yet museums and art institutions as contact and conflict zones<sup>21</sup> are once again increasingly at the center of discussions latching onto the discourse of New Institutionalism. This was about no less than redefining contemporary art institutions as active spaces of encounter. They have to be “part community centre, part laboratory and part academy”<sup>22</sup> and must function less as spaces of contemplative art appreciation. However, these approaches also proved to be relatively short-lived, so much so that in 2007 Nina Möntmann noted that a majority of the institutions regarded as belonging to New Institutionalism were “apparently reprimanded like insubordinate youths”<sup>23</sup> and “criticality didn’t survive the corporate turn in the institutional landscape.”<sup>24</sup> Alex Farquharson sees a further disadvantage in the fact that the institutions attributed to New Institutionalism did not succeed in generating broader publics apart from invited guests and insiders in order to consolidate the models:

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16 Charles Esche, *What’s the Point of Art Centres Anyway?*

17 Steven Henry Madoff, *What about Activism?*

See the section on artistic and curatorial practice in this publication.

18 Nora Sternfeld, *Das radikaldemokratische Museum*.

19 Robert R. Janes, Richard Sandell, *Museum Activism*.

20 Maura Reilly, *Curatorial Activism*.

21 See the section on museums and exhibitions as contact and conflict zones in this publication.

22 Charles Esche, loc. cit.

23 Nina Möntmann, *The Rise and Fall of New Institutionalism*.

24 Ibid.

“There is the sense that New Institutionalism has a model-like quality, that it is a prototype for a far larger kind of social production that may always remain deferred. In practice, new institutions often only engage relatively small constituencies, whose politics and subjectivities remain more or less aligned to those of the institutional actors. Their scale allows them to be highly focused and uncompromising.”<sup>25</sup>

While New Institutionalism's approaches were additionally accused of a “certain art field internal, organizational blindness,”<sup>26</sup> what is striking about the new demands for a counter-hegemonic, radically democratic, activist, or post-representative museum is that surprisingly little thought was given to the possible financing<sup>27</sup> of these up-and-coming institutions and the positioning of critical artists and activists in this field. The basic question of whether museums actually possess the (postulated) great relevance to a radical democracy also went unraised. It seems as if too much was being expected of museums and other art institutions, while in other instances too little confidence was being placed in them.

Something similar is true of the discourse and the practice of curating itself; both have become pivotal hinges in social self-understanding: Not only are exhibitions curated, but more and more theory programs, film series, music, dance and theater festivals are too. Curating also abounds well beyond the area of culture: Whether on the internet, in fashion, shop concepts, or in regard to one's own possessions—life in general is being curated, as Andreas Reckwitz remarked in view of what he describes as the “society of singularities.”<sup>28</sup> Curating has long become a vogue expression. Even though the roots of the word go far back into history, the current hype is evidently a zeitgeisty phenomenon: The excessive supply of commodities, information, and mediated impressions

25 Alex Farquharson, *Institutional Mores*.

26 Oliver Marchart, *Hegemonie im Kunstfeld*, p. 29. Marchart writes that “the debates on *New Institutionalism* [...] are all too often limited to questions of structure and thus fall victim to a certain apparatusism, or even to a certain art field internal operational blindness. But it makes little sense to analyze institutional structures without examining what hegemonic discourses they reproduce and the social forces that employ them.”

27 On the limitations of New Institutionalism, Sven Lütticken writes: “[...] though overall it did little to challenge the fundamental organizational and funding structures.” See same, *The Postpersonal is Critical*, p. 248.

28 Andreas Reckwitz, *Die Gesellschaft der Singularitäten*.

and content demands assessment, selection and presentation. In this expanded sense, curating could be described as having the function of a filter: A selection is made from a huge offer and is displayed in an orderly way. Meanwhile, the iPhone’s algorithm “curates” the photos selected for the user under the category “For you” as the selection of the supposedly nicest moments in one’s self-documented life. However, the excessive use of the term threatens to forfeit any kind of discriminatory power and might blur the differences between different fields, institutions, activities, motivations, and their economic implications.

Even if defining artists and curators as role models for a creative, flexible and self-disciplined subject is tantamount to an ideological glorification that conceals constitutive ambiguities, it cannot be denied that the neoliberal labor regime prompts subjects to self-optimization, creativity,<sup>29</sup> flexibility, mobility, personal responsibility, self-entrepreneurship,<sup>30</sup> and distinctiveness. The valorization of informational, affective, communicative, and cultural aspects of life as labor<sup>31</sup> leads to a far-reaching erosion of the differentiation not only between production and reproduction, but also between the fields of economy and culture. The sociologists Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre note<sup>32</sup> that the connection between museums, art, luxury goods, real estate, and tourism has become key to an economy of enrichment that increasingly characterizes Western societies and mostly benefits “the rich.” This new capitalism’s primary goal is no longer the industrial production of commodities, but the “enrichment” of things that already exist. While the value of things usually decreases over time, it grows with these objects. The generation of traditions and narrations, by means of artistic and curatorial production and presentation methods, is pivotal for the “enrichment”.

One need not demand the abolishment of curators, as Stefan Heidenreich does, as a result of these entanglements and complicities.<sup>33</sup> For Heidenreich, curating is “undemocratic, authoritarian and corrupt.” His reproach is that “many exhibitions have become promotion events for the art market.” Against the “epidemic of curating,” he recommends involving the visitors in the planning of exhibitions, viewing them as sufficiently competent on account of their use of social platforms, compilation of playlists and selection of photos

29 Andreas Reckwitz, *Die Erfindung der Kreativität*.

30 Ulrich Bröckling, *Das unternehmerische Selbst*.

31 Maurizio Lazzarato, *Immaterial Labor*.

32 Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre, *Enrichment: A Critique of Commodities*.

33 Stefan Heidenreich, *Schafft die Kuratoren ab!*.

for their Instagram accounts, while disregarding the key importance of these activities for the feedback loops of information capitalism. It is equally true of curating that too much is expected of its practice and elsewhere too little confidence is placed in it.

Perhaps it might be helpful in this situation to depart from the fixation on museums and curating and to instead pay more attention to artistic practices and articulations in which the exhibition as a medium might be reconfigured. A new potential of resistance also emerges when artistic and/or curatorial critique responds to often already existing political initiatives of other actors with regards to activist efforts: These include the protests organized by artists, such as Nan Goldin and Hito Steyerl, against the sponsoring of art institutions by the Sackler family's U.S. pharmaceutical corporation (whose painkiller Oxycontin and its promotion count as among the main causes of the opioid crisis in the United States); the successful intervention against the managing director of the Serpentine Gallery (because of her investment in a company that produces surveillance software that is used against human rights activists) and against a member of the advisory board of the Whitney Museum (whose company manufactures tear gas that is used against migrants on the U.S. border)<sup>34</sup>; the Tate London's success after seeing itself forced, after 26 years, to withdraw from its sponsoring contract with the multinational oil company BP; we should not forget the ongoing debate concerning the objects and artifacts that European ethnographic collections largely acquired under colonial power relations.<sup>35</sup>

Shortly after artistic institutional critique was included in the canon of art history and in museum collections, something which was criticized at the time, another form of critique of the institutions of the art field emerged that was modeled on Hans Haacke<sup>36</sup> or the protest forms of AIDS activism (e.g., ACT UP!). The return of institutional critique under different conditions has been surprisingly successful because it raises the justified question about art institutions' ethical responsibility and has managed to create networks with other social movements outside of the art field. In his text on the successes of a renewed institutional critique, Jörg Heiser addresses the risk of artwashing, an accusation also made against the previous institutional critique of the

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34 On this aspect, see Robert Trafford's contribution on the practice of Forensic Architecture in this publication – and on the TRIPLE-CHASER project in particular.

35 Jörg Heiser, *Kann die Kunst sich das leisten?*.

36 See also the contribution by Angeli Sachs in this publication.



mid-2000s to the mid-2010s; the reason here is that the institution-critical works relied on the consent of the inviting institutions to exhibit their works in the first place.<sup>37</sup> Only a few exhibitions were canceled due to institution-critical articulations.<sup>38</sup> Through artwashing and “commissioned critique,” so to speak, institutions were able to present themselves to the outside in a self-critical way, while changing little in regard to the fundamental problems. In 2019, Heiser considered the timeliness of these tendencies to have already ended due to a greater public sensitivity toward these concerns. However, the fact that this diagnosis is not correct in all cases is demonstrated by the current, controversial debates on including the collection of the arms producer and dealer Emil Georg Bührle in a specially built annex of the Kunsthau Zürich.<sup>39</sup> Such examples are not exceptions, but point to a fundamental, systemic problem. Andrea Fraser impressively showed how this can come about for the American context in her publication “2016 in Museums, Money, and Politics”<sup>40</sup>: Based on publically accessible information, she and her team were able to prove that a tiny upper class of super-rich families financed more than 50 percent of the American election campaigns. Many trustees of art museums are (astoundingly) among these few. These entanglements of wealth and influence on the decisions of museums and politics, but also the clear lurch to the right in Eastern Europe and elsewhere—leading to museums and exhibitions again being devoted to the service of populist and national self-assurance and propaganda<sup>41</sup>—evidence the necessity of the critique of art and other institutions. When we ask ourselves in this context, “What Ever Happened to

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37 Helmut Draxler, *The Habitus of the Critical*.

38 The most famous example is the cancelation of Hans Haacke's solo show by the New York Guggenheim Museum five weeks before the opening in 1971. Haacke had conducted research on the dubious real estate agent Harry Shapolsky and found out that members of the museum's board were also involved in these business transactions.

39 Erich Keller, *Das kontaminierte Museum*.

40 Andrea Fraser, *2016 in Museums, Money, and Politics*.

41 Many countries have experienced a nationalistic turn in the past years. States such as Russia, Turkey, Hungary, and Poland massively intervene in cultural policies and use them to turn against minorities in their own country, against alleged influence from abroad, and for the purposes of state propaganda. For example, the governing national-conservative PiS (“Law and Justice”) party in Poland replaced a number of directors of cultural institutions with conservative figures.

New Institutionalism?”<sup>42</sup> the title of a publication by the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, it becomes clear that we need a “new New Institutionalism,”<sup>43</sup> “Institutions of Critique”<sup>44</sup> or “The Institution of Critique,”<sup>45</sup> the title of a text by Hito Steyerl that ends with the following assertion:

“[W]hile critical institutions are being dismantled by neoliberal institutional criticism, this produces an ambivalent subject which develops multiple strategies for dealing with its dislocation. It is on the one side being adapted to the needs of ever more precarious living conditions. On the other, there seems to have hardly ever been more need for institutions which could cater to the new needs and desires that this constituency will create.”<sup>46</sup>

Approaches like Maura Reilly’s “curatorial activism”<sup>47</sup> seek to reform the institutions from the inside. She is concerned with the ethical claim ensuring that hitherto marginalized groups of artists, who have been excluded from ART, are included more in exhibitions and collections through counter-hegemonic initiatives and a realigning of the canon: women, artists of color, non-Euro-Americans, and queer artists. In addition to giving historical examples showing that this form of curating had once been possible, Reilly insists that curators (and other persons in the art field) must be willing to perform self-critique, and subsequently cites bell hooks: “[we must] produce work that opposes structures of domination, that presents possibilities for a transformed future by willingly interrogating our own work on aesthetic or political grounds. This interrogation itself becomes an act of critical intervention, fundamentally fostering an

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42 James Voorhies, *What Ever Happened to New Institutionalism?*. The title refers to the exhibition *What Happened to the Institutional Critique?* (and the eponymous text in: Peter Weibel, *Kontext Kunst. Kunst der 90er Jahre*, p. 239–256), that James Meyer curated in 1993 at American Fine Arts in New York. Voorhies understands his question more as a rhetorical one aimed at initiating a discourse. He already knows the answer: “We know the answer in a broader sense: critique must perform a constant reworking before it ‘sets in’ to institution and becomes the subject of its original scrutiny. Capital moves forward, and critique must move along.” In: same, *Prologue: to a beautiful problem*, p. 11.

43 Oliver Marchart, *Hegemonie im Kunstfeld*, p. 29.

44 Andrea Fraser, *From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique*.

45 Hito Steyerl, *The Institution of Critique*.

46 Ibid.

47 See also the contribution by Angeli Sachs in this publication, which discusses Maura Reilly’s position in greater detail.

attitude of vigilance rather than denial.”<sup>48</sup> It is somewhat surprising that Reilly incorporates this quote, since it goes beyond her approach in that it calls for no longer ignoring the under- or un-represented, the silenced and/or “doubly colonized,”<sup>49</sup> and including them in collections and exhibitions. Reilly is concerned with the critique of representation and equal ratios of representatives of the dominant society and marginalized groups in the art system, but not necessarily with organizing fundamentally different types of exhibitions or with “using” museums. bell hook’s quote can be interpreted as a call for a farther-reaching, counter-hegemonic intervention, as advocated by Chantal Mouffe, for example. In her text “Artistic Strategies in Politics and Political Strategies in Art,”<sup>50</sup> she also advocates counter-hegemonic, artistic practices, and the museum being a space for possible agonistic confrontations, while also emphasizing that we must be aware that critical art practices alone cannot replace political practices. Reliable chains of equivalence to other political groups in other social fields are always needed to assert a new hegemonic order.<sup>51</sup> Marchart, who refers to Mouffe, states that the exhibition (understood as “ex/position” according to Jérôme Sans) leads to an opening of the institution: “And the ex-position leads it *out* of the institutions of art and the art field—into the political practice.”<sup>52</sup>

This does not require one approach to be played off against the other. Both the curatorial activism endorsed by Reilly and an artistic or curatorial activism seeking to become effective beyond the boundaries of the art field, by generating agonisms and creating chains of equivalence to other social groups, are very important. That they can both be combined in one place was impressively demonstrated by Manuel Borja-Villel in collaboration with, among others, Jorge Ribalta (from 1999 to 2009 director of the discourse and event program) at the MACBA in Barcelona (1998 to 2008) and later in collaboration with, among others, Jesús Carrillo (from 2008 to 2015 director of the cultural programs) at the Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid. The strategy at the MACBA was twofold: On the one hand, monographic shows and temporary exhibitions were featured that also addressed the usual museum audience; on the other, emphasis was

48 Cited in Maura Reilly, *What Is Curatorial Activism?*.

49 Ibid.

50 Chantal Mouffe, *Artistic Strategies in Politics and Political Strategies in Art*.

51 For an in-depth discussion of the theory of hegemony, see Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

52 Oliver Marchart, *Die kuratorische Funktion*, p. 179.

also placed on discursive events that broke with the hegemony of the exhibition as a medium to enable different, non-hierarchical forms of using the museum and its resources in a self-critical way, which was open for debates on the “reconstruction of a radically public sphere”<sup>53</sup>:

“Another objective of the MACBA was to establish a vibrant relation between the museum and the city, and to provide a space for debate and the expression of conflicts. Looking for ways in which art could make a significant contribution to a multiplication of public spheres, it encouraged contacts between different social movements,”<sup>54</sup>

according to Chantal Mouffe. The methodical approaches were geared to either inventing or finding alternative forms of educational and cultural work oriented toward the activities of new social movements and grasping the public as transformation, not as reproduction. A crucial moment consisted in bringing artists and artist collectives together with people and groups from the new social movements to jointly “start certain processes or articulate local political struggles with artistic means and thus aim for continuity.”<sup>55</sup> Even if this orientation could not be realized without contradictions,<sup>56</sup> the program extended far beyond the traditional functions of an art museum and opened up the institution for a political practice.

As the director of the Museo Reina Sofía (2008–2023), Manuel Borja-Villel, also espoused a progressive museum practice, as Claire Bishop stresses in her publication *Radical Museology*: “[...] the museum has adopted a self/critical representation of the country’s colonialist past, positioning Spain’s own history within a larger international context.”<sup>57</sup>

This is demonstrated, for example, by the collaboration with Red Conceptualismos del Sur, a research alliance examining and archiving the political antagonisms of conceptual art practices during the time of the dictatorships

53 Jorge Ribalta, *Mediation and Construction of Publics*.

54 Chantal Mouffe, *Institutions as Sites of Agonistic Intervention*, p. 72.

55 Jorge Ribalta, *Mediation and Construction of Publics*.

56 It was criticized, for example, that the institution has what could be called a blind spot in regard to its own internal structures that goes with the (re-)production of hierarchical structures and precarious working conditions within the institution. Anthony Davies, *Take Me I’m Yours: Neoliberalising the Cultural Institution*.

57 Claire Bishop, *Radical Museology*, p. 38.

in Latin America. Documentations of political art practices and their contextualizations are compiled in a so-called archive of commons, and the Western canon is decentered by directing the view to a number of modernisms that were simultaneously being articulated in different continents. The works of the own collection are also placed in a broader political and social context. For example, Picassos *Guernica*<sup>58</sup>—which had previously claimed an entire hall for itself in an auratic way—was exhibited alongside a documentation on the Spanish Civil War and other contemporary documents so as “to free” the painting from the art-historical discourse regarding it merely under the aspect of formal inventions and as the product of a singular genius. Contact exchange with social movements continues to be pursued alongside the approach of “radical education”<sup>59</sup> that views artworks as “relational objects” so as to reveal and convey their psychological, physical, social, and political dimensions. In regard to the exhibition *Really Useful Knowledge*, curated by the WHW collective, Borja-Villel writes about the attempt to redefine the limitation of the museum and to understand “culture as a battlefield for political hegemony.”<sup>60</sup> He continues: “All political action in an institution must take place from self-reflection and self-critique, for questioning the museum is not enough; there is a need to democratize it.”<sup>61</sup> For him, the exhibition in this context is also a good example of, and a model for, updating institutional critique that, in addition to being rooted in the neighborhood in which it is located, established chains of equivalence with social movements.<sup>62</sup> This is a renewal and shift that come close to what Gerald Raunig describes as “instituent practices.” He calls for practices that succeed in combining social criticism with a critical self-questioning “and yet do not cling to their own involvement, their complicity, their imprisoned existence in the art field, their fixation on institutions and the institution, their own being-institution.”<sup>63</sup> These “instituent practices” connect the achievements of the two phases of artistic institutional critique, self-critique and

58 See also the contribution by Angeli Sachs in this publication, which deals with the painting from a different perspective.

59 Ibid. p. 43.

60 Manuel Borja-Villel, *Really Useful Knowledge*, p. 180. See also the contribution by Thomas Sieber in this publication, which deals with the constitutive conflictuality of museums and exhibition institutions and goes into Chantal Mouffe's theory of democracy in greater detail.

61 Ibid. p. 181.

62 See Jesús Carrillo Castillo, ‘Really Useful Knowledge’ and Institutional Learning.

63 Gerald Raunig, *Instituent Practices. Fleeing, Instituting, Transforming*.

social criticism: "This link will develop, most of all, from the direct and indirect concatenation with political practices and social movements, but without dispensing with artistic competences and strategies, without dispensing with resources of and effects in the art field."<sup>64</sup>

That fact that Borja-Villel's assessment, inspired by Antonio Gramsci, of "culture as a battlefield for political hegemony" was correct became apparent this year when he saw himself forced to resign as the director of the Museo Reina Sofia after open hostilities by the right-wing media. Even though, or more likely precisely because, he had succeeded in making his institution a highly acclaimed model through the described restructuring, with the museum today ranking among the ten most visited ones, he navigated into the midst of a "culture war" that in its harshness is reminiscent of the one in the United States during the Reagan era. For example, he was accused of pursuing a "monolithic ideological discourse" and forming an alliance with militant leftists. In an open letter sent via e-flux, an impressive number of national and international representatives of the art field (and beyond) expressed their solidarity with the director who stepped down, and concluded that "[t]he extreme violence of the attacks perpetrated against Manuel Borja-Villel and those around him are proof that there is something more at stake than his tenure. These attacks are part of a defamatory campaign directed at the model the Museum represents [...]."<sup>65</sup>

Against the background of the further dismantling of the welfare state by a late-capitalist regime, an evident surge to the right in many governments throughout the world, the fending off of migrants, and not least the climate crisis, the most pertinent question posed to art institutions today for Charles Esche is not "what art to show," but rather "what kind of politics to stand behind."<sup>66</sup> Institutions should be judged according to the extent to which they seek connections to fields outside the art field to trigger and engage in social

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64 Ibid. In this respect, see also the chapter *Dies ist (k)ein Fazit* in Sönke Gau, *Institutionskritik als Methode*, p. 490–510, and Karen Archey, *After Institutions*. Archey calls for a revival of institutional critique as a practice of care. "To free Institutional Critique from Conceptual Art is also to challenge the whiteness and Eurocentrism of these canons and to gain the opportunity to use other forms of address and communication, thereby tapping knowledge bases currently underrepresented in the field." Ibid., p. 14.

65 Open Letter: On the Departure of Manuel Borja-Villel as Director of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia.

66 Charles Esche, *The Deviant Art Institution*.

discourses that go beyond the orientation toward the (art) market. Esche further states that this shift to an extra-disciplinary practice does not mean that art’s unique qualities should be abandoned, but that they should be used in new areas and for purposes other than to preserve art’s own status. At the end of his appeal, the mausoleum mentioned above reappears, albeit not in the sense of Adorno’s critique but in an affirmative way, as a family vault for modernity:

“In these circumstances, a clear commitment to action against the modern on the part of art institutions is what is required. Modernity itself has to be buried in a suitably rich, minimal mausoleum (perhaps called the Museum of Modern Art, New York) and as a European society in dialogue with the world we need to start looking around us at where we are. This can be done in part, I genuinely believe, by using the (minor) network of artistic forces and institutions across the world that want to join in constructing forms of deviance that disobey the rules we have inherited.”<sup>67</sup>

We can only hope that the Museo Reina Sofia cited here, as an example and in the light of recent events, will continue to belong to this open network of progressive art institutions<sup>68</sup> and will proceed with the work it has begun. As the authors of the Open Letter formulate in its support, it is the mission of the community to counter the blunt attacks in order to secure the continuity of the work achieved to date and its future development.<sup>69</sup> If institutional critique and New Institutionalism are understood less as a material and component of the history of art and museums, and more as a method, then it becomes possible to visualize and thus to criticize the intersections of discourses, practices, power and knowledge relations, institutions, and subjects as well as the

67 Ibid.

68 Under the umbrella of L’Internationale, the *Museo Reina Sofia*, Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen, Moderna galerija (MG+msum), Ljubljana, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, MACBA, Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona, Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej w Warszawie, SALT Research and programs Istanbul and Ankara) as well as the partner institutions National College of Art and Design (NCAD), Dublin, and Valand Academy (Gothenburg University) have formed an alliance. Of course, further institutions should be mentioned in this context, for example, CASCO (Utrecht), Tensta konsthall (near Stockholm) and Metabolic Museum-University (MM-U), Berlin, to which the following contributions in this section are dedicated.

69 Open Letter: On the Departure of Manuel Borja-Villel as Director of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia.

governmental relationship between external administration and self-management. The potential of a resistant practice, which is by no means limited to the art field, is inherent in this expanded understanding of institutional critique as well as an analysis of power that, in a certain way, presents and represents complex knowledge and power relations through its aesthetic qualities of showing and narrating, thereby intervening in their enactment.<sup>70</sup>

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70 Sønke Gau, Dies ist (k)ein Fazit.