

# Metropolis M

October/November 2022

After Institutions, The Art of Critique  
By Remco Torenbosch



Maria Eichhorn, *Relocating a Structure*, 2022. German pavilion, La Biennale di Venezia. Detail: foundations of the 1909 rear facade; rear facade of the 1909 building, interior wall from 1938, demolished in 1964; wall lettering; chimney from an earlier building (undated); doorway to the right side room from 1909, bricked up in 1912. Photo by Jens Ziehe.

Two recent publications arising from wholly or half-cancelled exhibitions at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and the Frans Hals Museum look at the renewed topicality of institutional critique. The critical questions raised in the functioning of contemporary art institutions sound more urgent than they have long been.

In 2019, in an article in this journal\*, I argued for a renewed look at the phenomenon of “institutional critique.” Now, in 2022, to my delight, two new publications have been published, both of which shed light on this subject in their own entirely unique way: *After Institutions* written by Karen Archey, conservator at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, and *The Art of Critique* compiled by Melanie Bühler, curator at the Frans Hals Museum in Haarlem. What is immediately noticeable is that both publications were made by museum curators working in the Netherlands and both came about in response to a cancelled or partially cancelled exhibition on institutional critique in their own museum—the irony does not escape me here. Both want to explore what institutional critique is and (still) has to mean, especially with respect to the museum. They want to test the role of critique within art and seek an extension of the definition of institutional critique as handed down to us by the past. Although Archey and Bühler start from the same point, this results in two very different publications.

In her essay, Archey speaks at length about the genealogy of institutional critique, following the fairly common explanation of three waves: the first wave covers the 1960s and 1970s, with artists such as Hans Haacke and Michael Asher, who criticized the institution from the outside; the second wave followed in the 1980s and 1990s, with artists such as Andrea Fraser and Renée Green seeking the possibility of a critical position from within. The third wave is in the present and is formed by artists and collectives committed to what has been called the “liberation” of the art world. They focus on questions that have emerged around diversity and inclusivity following Occupy Wallstreet, #MeToo, Black Lives Matter and various decolonial and LGBTI movements.



Maria Eichhorn, *Relocating a Structure*, 2022. German pavilion, La Biennale di Venezia. Detail: wall lettering; doorway to main room from 1909, walled in 1912, reopened in 1928, walled in 1938; doorway to front left side room from 1909, walled in 1938; wall from 1909 between two side rooms, demolished in 1938; doorway to rear left side room from 1909, walled in 1928; doorway to main room from 1909, walled in 1912. Photo by Jens Ziehe.

A common criticism is that institutionalized critique bites its own tail and sooner or later becomes institutionalized itself. That criticism, which has been detailed in particular by the artist Andrea Fraser, is in dire need of nuance. In an interview with Archey, part of Bühler’s volume, Fraser herself says, “My position has been that what distinguishes institutional critique from those avant-garde traditions was the recognition that artists are a central part of the institution of art, even those associated with avant-garde traditions. So institutional critique has always been an essential part of the institution, and can only function there. Institutional critique has never been about the total demolition of the institution. Instead, it was always intended as constructive criticism, and especially directed against the encapsulation of art by the market and politics. Or, as Fraser writes in her famous article “From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique” in *Artforum* (2005), “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.

Whereas Archey takes you into a personal account of her research, shares excerpts from her preparatory conversations and provides insight into what the exhibition could have looked like, Bühler’s publication functions as a conclusion to her own multi-part exhibition project at the Frans Hals Museum. The book functions as an exhibit on paper and more or less replaces the exhibition section that was cancelled by the coronavirus. One striking similarity, however, is that the dematerialization of the art object is virtually absent from both publications, especially now.

The undermining and politicization of the exhibition space through immaterial art objects characterizes the first wave. This dematerialization manifested itself particularly in working with legal and political tactics such as contracts and legislations, which, with the growth especially of the U.S. art market, were also emerging elsewhere in the art world. From Marxist motivations, a strong desire had arisen to break with this art-market-dominated art and distance itself from its highly individualistic dynamics. In

particular, the artist's studio, which was seen as the "architecture of capitalism," had to lose out: in a world of overproduction, art must ask itself why even more (art) objects have to be added to this world, since we already have our hands full with (re)defining what is already there.

### A new twist

It was a radical departure, it still is, and more topical than ever given the increasing overproduction and scarcity of raw materials. Consequently, dematerializing the art object is currently experiencing a resurgence, with artists such as Cameron Rowland and Maria Eichhorn. Yet this is not getting the attention you might expect. The current wave of institutional critique is highlighted differently in the two publications, but always seems to be a conscious break with what once made institutional critique archetypal. The result is a return to the more traditional art forms like painting and sculpture that still define the international art market.

An example of a broader definition of institutional critique advocated by Archey is *One Day's Medication* (1993), this assemblage of medicine bottles and syringes made by Derek Jarman a year before his death from AIDS. Despite its more classical approach, the work almost seamlessly connects to recent works on care made by the current generation of artists who are critical of the operation of the art world. Almost without exception, these works by Carolyn Lazard and Park McArthur also depart from their personal experience of living with a medical disability. From there they criticize the way in which different institutions, both inside and outside art, deal with care.



Cameron Rowland, *Encumbrance*, 2020. Mortgage; mahogany double doors: 12 Carlton House Terrace, ground floor, front entrance

The property relation of the enslaved included and exceeded that of chattel and real estate. Plantation mortgages exemplify the ways in which the value of people who were enslaved, the land they were forced to labor on, and the houses they were forced to maintain were mutually constitutive. Richard Pares writes that "[mortgages] became commoner and commoner until, by 1800, almost every large plantation debt was a mortgage debt." Slaves simultaneously functioned as collateral for the debts of their masters, while laboring intergenerationally under the debt of the master. The taxation of plantation products imported to Britain, as well as the taxation of interest paid to plantation lenders, provided revenue for Parliament and income for the monarch.

Mahogany became a valuable British import in the 18th century. It was used for a wide variety of architectural applications and furniture, characterizing Georgian and Regency styles. The timbers were felled and milled by slaves in Jamaica, Barbados, and Honduras among other British colonies. It is one of the few commodities of the triangular trade that continues to generate value for those who currently own it.

After taking the throne in 1820, George IV dismantled his residence, Carlton House, and the house of his parents, Buckingham House, combining elements from each to create Buckingham Palace. He built Carlton House Terrace between 1827 and 1832 on the former site of Carlton House as a series of elite rental properties to generate revenue for the Crown. All addresses at Carlton House Terrace are still owned by the Crown Estate, manager of land owned by the Crown since 1760.

12 Carlton House Terrace is leased to the Institute of Contemporary Arts. The building includes four mahogany doors and one mahogany handrail. These five mahogany elements were mortgaged by the Institute of Contemporary Arts to Encumbrance Inc. on January 16th, 2020 for £1000 each. These loans will not be repaid by the ICA. As security for these outstanding debts, Encumbrance Inc. will retain a security interest in these mahogany elements. This interest will constitute an encumbrance on the future transaction of 12 Carlton House Terrace. An encumbrance is a right or interest in real property that does not prohibit its exchange but diminishes its value. The encumbrance will remain on 12 Carlton House Terrace as long as the mahogany elements are part of the building. As reparation, this encumbrance seeks to limit the property's continued accumulation of value for the Crown Estate. The Crown Estate provides 75% of its revenue to the Treasury and 25% directly to the monarch.

Courtesy the artist and Maxwell Graham/Essex Street, New York

In direct opposition to this is work cited by Bühler that takes a deliberately populist/postmodern approach. By going against the aesthetic expectations of institutional criticism, Bühler mainly chose works with a postmodern edge in order to hold up a mirror to populism. A good example in this regard is Simon Fujiwara's *Who's at the Frans Hals Whoseum?* (2021), which focuses on the cartoon character he created, "Who the Bær." Through recognizable images, his work reveals a simplified lens for considering our visual culture, the paradox of our search for fantasy and authenticity in the culture we consume. Still, this work makes one strongly wonder if it is merely employing a populist strategy or if the work is simply populist or escapist. Sharper are the contributions of Ima-Abasi Okon and Tony Cokes who both put existing text and visual material into a new context, reflecting on the production of subjectivity under global capitalism. Through appropriation and reuse of texts from popular and protest culture, they subtly show that old values or ideas are not necessarily obsolete but have often not been implemented radically enough.

Both *After Institutions* and *The Art of Critique* show how institutional critique lives on: not so much as history, but centrally at the heart of the art world, where it champions new positions emerging from, for example, Black, decolonial, LGBTI+, and disability studies. The activist stance within the current wave of institutional critique is widespread and expanding. In the process, critique without consequences forever seems to be a thing of the past. Artists involve themselves in the social criticism of protest movements and formulate their criticism of the art world itself from there.

We also see new artist-driven protest organizations emerging from the art world, such as Decolonize This Place, a decolonial movement that grew out of an action at the Brooklyn Museum. Another example is P.A.I.N. (Prescription Addiction Intervention Now), an advocacy organization founded by Nan Goldin to respond to the opiate crisis. In particular, this group opposes the toxic philanthropy of the Sackler family, which accumulates billions in wealth thanks to the pharmaceutical industry, and is a very large donor for the American Museum of Natural History, the Guggenheim and Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, as well as Tate London, among others. That organization, by the way, has its own protest organization: Liberate Tate, an art collective with a primary focus on Tate and its so-so sponsorship by BP. Finally, I mention the Gulf Labor Artist Coalition, a coalition of artists and activists to ensure that the rights of migrant workers are protected during the construction of the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi, Louvre Abu Dhabi and the Sheikh Zayed Palace Museum Abu Dhabi.



Park McArthur, *Contact H*, 2016. A sculpture consisting of a thin stainless steel tray overflowing with barrier creams, foam dressings and gel heel protectors in various packages, displayed on a white pedestal. Courtesy the artist and Maxwell Graham/Essex Street, New York.

Despite there being little to no self-criticism of the institutions within which these curators work in the two publications, both Archey and Bühler show that the concept works better when it is removed—removed from the limiting context of art and the academic field that gives it restrictive definitions.

Rather, look for the space of *general intellect*, what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten call “the Undercommons.” It gives meaning to a critical practice that is not only ubiquitous but also all-encompassing. Personally, I think this is where the future of what to expect from institutional critique lies: critique with consequences, a decolonial reform and a constant counter-movement to the neoliberal hyper-capitalism that is seeping ever further into the institutional art world.