

**60 Years of Curating
ICA Talks**

“Institutional Critique: Can the institution ever criticise”

October 29, 2008

Speakers:

Roger Malbert, Senior Curator, Hayward Touring Exhibitions

Carey Young, artist

Dave Beech, artist and member of the collective Freee

Simon Sheikh, critic and curator, Berlin

Peter Osborne, Director of the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy, Middlesex University, and an editor of the journal Radical Philosophy.

Chair:

Victoria Preston, Deputy Director, Centre d'Art Contemporain, Geneva and PhD candidate, Birkbeck, researching Institutional Critique.

Introduction

The starting point for my interest in institutional critique was in 2005 during a seminar on the role of cultural institutions held at the ICA run by Jens Hoffmann then Director of Exhibitions. So it's a great pleasure to be invited to chair this discussion on institutional critique with such a distinguished and prestigious panel. I would also like to thank Ben Cranfield and Jennifer Thatcher for this opportunity to chair the final session of the ICA's talk's series, "60 years of curating".

Looking back at significant curatorial approaches in the ICA's history, its treatment of institutional critique appears to have taken a different course to some other institutions. Rather than "be the institution being critiqued" (I am thinking of Hans Haacke's projects at the Guggenheim and MoMA), the ICA has chosen to host re-contextualisations of institutional critique shows occurring elsewhere. Noteworthy are: *When Attitudes Become Form*, 1969, first shown at the Kunsthalle Bern in 1968, *Art into Society, Society into Art*, 1974, first shown a year earlier at the Kunstverein Hanover as *Kunst im Politischen Kampf* (Art in the Political Struggle) or re-stagings such as Martha Rosler's *Garage Sale*, originally exhibited in the art gallery of the University of California in San Diego in 1973 and restaged at the ICA in 2005. It's interesting to revisit these approaches because they explore issues of curatorial selection that we take for granted today. I am referring particularly to the appropriateness of bringing political and social issues into the exhibition space, which of course is no longer controversial. Today such interventions are received as artworks that tend to be affirmative of the status quo and their critical connection to "life" or "society" is generally not in focus. So perhaps these revivals in institutional critique practice could provoke an interesting dialogue and inject some optimism into our increasingly jaded view of the encroachment of neo-liberalism into the cultural sphere.

For some members of the audience who may be unfamiliar with the term: "institutional critique" was coined in the mid-1980's by members of the Whitney Independent Study Programme in New York (notably the artist, Andrea Fraser) and was applied retrospectively to a whole generation of

artists practicing in the 1960s and 70s (for example, Michael Asher, Daniel Buren Hans Haacke and more recently Marcel Broodthaers), whose work was concerned with spatial, curatorial, social, political and economic issues endemic to cultural institutions. The theoretical underpinnings of institutional critique were explored by the *October* journal, notably in Benjamin Buchloh's article: "From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions". A major milestone in its history was James Meyer's exhibition in 1993, *Whatever happened to institutional critique?* held at American Fine Arts Co., New York, which by positioning the debate outside the art institution into the wider cultural sphere, questioned the significance of the term "institution" and what it means to critique it.

It would be helpful to clarify at this point what we mean by the term institution as its obviously more than the exhibition space and includes the discourse around it (art criticism), the academy (counter-academy), the institution of art (and its theories) together with the notion of new institutionalism. It's important also to free the term "institution" of its pejorative associations. That we need institutions is not in question, but what needs to be clarified are which institutions are appropriate and how we can have a stake in their agendas? What are these notions of instituting (Gerald Raunig), re-instituting (Samuel Weber) and self-instituting (Jakob Jakobsen)?

The title of this talks series: "Institutional Critique: Can the institution ever criticise" seems to turn the subject on its head, a sort of "the institution strikes back". In the past some institutions have appropriated and arguably neutralized many critical endeavours in this field. However other institutions, for example MACBA in Barcelona, have been at the forefront of

new thinking on the role of cultural institutions in the 21st century, as its recent symposiums attest: “Rethinking cultural organizations in the new cultural economy” and “Molecular Museum: Can cultural heritage be organized through non-territorial networks? Towards a new kind of institutionality”. Members of our panel have written on the critical role of cultural institutions in contemporary society and I would like first to call on Simon Sheikh to comment on these phenomena.