

PhD Abstract

Strategies of Institutional Critique: Historicising and theorising developments post 1968.

My research explores methods of institutional critique in art and curatorial practice. It takes as its starting point Kant's notion of an independent critique and revisits institutional critique post 1968. My investigation reflects on institutional critique as a mode of practice and explores its relationship with cultural institutions during periods of economic imperatives and policy-led institutional change. I challenge David Beech's approach in defining institutional critique as "a postmodern art practice, like neo geo painting or appropriationist sculpture" limited to specific artists practicing in a specific time period. I argue instead that institutional critique is better viewed as an "evolving genre" as stated by Alexander Alberro or a "mode of practice" as advocated by Nina Möntmann with possible application over a wider time frame. I am concerned with specific artworks and curatorial practices, their contextualisation, mode of reception and relationship with cultural institutions. My research is situated within an understanding of the cultural, political and economic forces that shape art institutions. It focuses predominantly on art and curatorial practice in the USA and Europe, but also includes selected examples from South America and Eastern Europe.

I use several different methodologies to conduct my research, with socio-historical enquiry as the baseline methodology, supplemented by comparative research and narrative analysis. My research is conducted within an understanding of relational aesthetics, semiotics and art practice as research. Using these approaches and employing a mixture of methods, including selective use of archives and expert interviews, I investigate institutional critique through the practice of specific artists. With reference to the legacy of Marcel Duchamp, I examine the work of Marcel Broodthaers, Michael Asher, Daniel Buren and Hans Haacke as illustrative of the first wave of institutional critique in the 1960s and 1970s and Fred Wilson, Andrea Fraser and Christian Philipp Müller as key protagonists in institutional critique's second wave in the 1980s and 1990s. I investigate the conceptual arguments for extending the definition and scope of institutional critique made by James Meyer and Isabelle Graw. Mention of a potential third wave has been made by Simon Sheikh and by postgraduate students from the Critical, Curatorial Cybermedia postgraduate course at Ecole Supérieure des Beaux-Arts Geneva and the Arbeitsgemeinschaft deutscher Kunstverein. Building on these approaches, a case for a third wave of institutional critique is constituted by exploring the art practice of Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska, Carey Young, Nils Norman, Alice Creischer and Andreas Siekmann.

So far institutional critique and new institutionalism are regarded as separate fields. My research explores possible parallel agendas between institutional critique and critical curatorial initiatives in evidence particularly in the rise of new institutionalism. I question to what extent curatorial practice can shape cultural institutions and whether economic imperatives and cultural policy are more important. This in turn requires a critique of the taxonomy of institutions: museums, art centres, art institutes, Kunsthallen, new institutions and progressive institutions. Underlying this is a consideration of the different possible functions of art within institutional critique and their role in shaping the expectations of viewers as to what role cultural institutions should perform. Moving away from the museum as purveyor of bourgeois enlightened values as argued by Duncan (1995) and Bennet (1995) and a replacement for the declining authority of the church as maintained by Serota (1996), the current debate on the museum's role is situated between a palace for entertainment and diversion claimed by Jetzer (2006) and a contested space where ideological differences can be played out according to Beech (2006).

This debate is becoming increasingly relevant given the economic imperatives surrounding the survival of cultural institutions and can be directly related to the effects of the third wave and new institutionalism within the evolving role and function of institutional critique.