

# The cultural logic of criticality

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## Abstract

*The text is concerned with charting the emergence of 'criticality' as a technology of legitimation and power in contemporary art institutions and proximate discourses. 'Criticality' is examined as a 'cultural logic' and compared to different philosophical iterations of critique for the correspondences and divergences. Cybernetics provides a model for analysing how critique becomes functional to the maintenance of existing states of affairs, then other potential political avenues for critique as rhetorical stance and praxis are evaluated through case studies.*

## Keywords

art  
critique  
culture  
dissent  
public sphere  
institutions  
systems

Once the work of art is totally neutralized, ineffective, abstracted, safe, and politically lobotomised it is ready to be consumed by society. All is reduced to visual fodder and transportable merchandise. Innovations are allowed only if they support this kind of confinement.

(Smithson 1996: 154)

There are myriad ways to speak of what Robert Smithson referred to as 'cultural confinement' in 1972 in the space thus confined. Where once we had the neutralizing effect of the institutional container, now the institution is by far a more porous and pervasive condition, one which imprints its hold in a vanishing gesture that can be also enunciated as the reflex of reflexivity. Under pressure from market mechanisms and state agendas which emphasize efficiency and competitiveness, the art institutions and the discourses they join and propagate enter a holding pattern of doubt: about their mission and their constituencies. In this situation, outflanked by commercial galleries, art fairs, biennials and nimble ad hoc collectivities alike, public institutions (which can include networks of agents ranging from public collections, academic institutions and smaller or less constituted players) see opportunities arise for critique as a new type of added value which only institutional mediators are sufficiently established and historically independent enough to purvey. Critique, long since incorporated as an art theoretical asset, is now hegemonic, the sine qua non for discursive legitimacy in the circuits of art production and mediation.

Such an enthronement of critique has its parallels in another current axiom of art practice and curation, which is often also to be found in debates about how to reinvigorate civic activity: 'participation'. As a formalist and innocuous embrace of 'communities' and specific, targeted groups, although its efficacy is promoted as a tool to engage traditional, but atomized, art audiences also, the rubric of participation starts from the premise that

overcoming the supposed elitism of 'autonomous' art is a socially and politically worthwhile goal. But this ethical stance is regularly applied as an unproblematic means to soft-pedal what are frequently dubious or ill-defined social inclusion objectives which in many cases boil down to 'art is good', never mind how that good is defined or what impact power and property have on shaping such normative definitions. Participation has won immense popularity in recent years, as received wisdom, utopian hope and managerial technique, all of which exist in tension and contradiction.

I propose to look at 'critique' and participation as two faces of a cultural logic that produce and mediate their own confinement. In this sense, they are mechanisms which can be approached through either the sociological or political modalities of 'institutional' and 'immanent' critique, but they also evoke the vision of self-regulation in systems and the logical tautologies summed up in the term 'homoeostasis'. Consequently, I will be looking at cybernetics as a theory of systems management that relies on feedback from the agent in order to organize a self-perpetuating, metastable and controlled scenario. In other words, feedback, whether positive or disruptive, is to be harnessed towards the ends of the system's survival, and in fact negative feedback optimizes systemic function. In other words, control simply cannot happen without participation.

In attempting to define a historical trajectory and current topology for how critique came to occupy the value-added status it enjoys today, it may be useful to clarify the distinction between the logic of capital accumulation and the logic of symbolic capital accumulation. Capital subsists in a process of indefinite expansion by means of extracting surplus value from labour and, increasingly, through monopoly rent and non-renewable looting – the unproductivity to be observed in the current cycle of crisis and super-profits. Symbolic capital is accrued by agents in a specific social sphere (say, academia) which may not be directly equatable to material assets but translates into somewhat more numinous processes of professional advancement, authority or power in that field (Bourdieu 1984: 205). It is striking that a disjunctive relation may come to operate between capital and symbolic capital, inasmuch as cultural institutions may find themselves defending a concept of virtue, defined in aesthetic, humanistic or universalist terms, against what is perceived as the short-sighted economism of state or corporate power, on whose support they materially depend. This is also known as 'the bourgeois public sphere' in western democratic societies. Its apologia is called critique.

It is notable that when such a public sphere, contested at the best of times, feels the encroachment of market orthodoxies most strongly at a structural and ideological level, that the cultural institutions that mythically constitute this sphere rhetorically renew their commitment to it. Art institutions are both metonymic and typical of this propensity. Of course, this is generally a loyal opposition, one which views the institution as a bearer of civic virtues and artistic freedom understood as not beholden to the market, while accommodating it whenever possible in a bid to avoid marginality. While political activists or independent groups may be invited into the space of the museum to uphold its democratic credentials (an emblem of 'the new institutionalism'), it is equally likely that straightforward market ventures such as art fairs devise extensive talks programmes featuring

heavyweight critical intellectuals as well as hosting interventionist practices by such market-sceptical figures as Martha Rosler, etc. (Frieze Art Fair). While the former tries to reinvent art institutions against the market, the latter claims that the market is a natural habitat for the institution of art as such, a smooth space which de facto includes everything, collapsing the earlier distinction between capital as such and symbolic capital overtly, while art institutions in neoliberalized cultural polities disavow the centrality of this collapse inasmuch as they stick to a view of art institutions as democratic bulwarks against market imperatives (this is a trend more salient in Europe than in the United Kingdom, which never had deep link between progressive nationalism and state-supported cultural institutions, and is notable for the instrumentality of its arts policies).

Neoliberal re-structuring dictates integral transformations in the role of art institutions, with variable results as sketched above, and it also dictates a different, more positive role for critique in the legitimation of those institutions. As I have already used the term 'new institutionalism' and cited some of the context, a more formal definition is in order. As Rebecca Gordon-Nesbitt takes up the term (Gordon-Nesbitt 2003), it is exemplified by the approaches of curators such as Charles Esche, and Maria Lind, who programmatically sought to open up art institutions in their charge to aesthetic and political concerns foreign to the traditional museum fabric, practices that reflect the internalization of decades of institutional critique and a desire to embrace models of working that are flexible, autonomous and responsive to the needs of artist and local residents. However, according to Nina Möntmann, one of Gordon-Nesbitt's erstwhile colleagues at the now-defunct NIFCA (Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art), and a prominent exponent of the approach, even this limited 'institutionalization of critique' proved too much for culture bureaucrats, who in the past decade have muscled in on these smaller and more experimental institutions to get them in line with regional culture and leisure policies framed in terms of competitiveness and spectacle (Möntmann 2007). It has been suggested by some that the contradictions of this phenomenon can be spoken about in terms of public art institutions being caught between the assertion of one fraction of elite class interests (culture as economic asset, erosion of public funding) and the eclipse of another (the civic role of art institutions in the bourgeois public sphere) (French 2008). Rather than take the risk of making common ground with the other structurally disenfranchised of the processes they deplore discursively (market-led urban redevelopment, rationalized social spending), critical institutions clutch on to legitimacy by falling back on a notion of virtue which is market-agnostic and alludes to 'cultural memory'. This tactic of legitimation, through a rhetorical appeal to democratic or default leftist praxis, is structurally self-referential; its reflexivity a survival skill to placate all comers – open to criticism and open for business.

Thus a utopian doctrine of institutional mutability wins the day, with art institutions priding themselves on both their weakness (transience, openness, status as embattled public service) and their residual strength (resource magnets in networks of power, brand status). Such a defensive narrative ensures that the path of 'criticism' is always open, so long as the criticism does not take up 'class power within art institutions themselves and across the commercial sectors with which they interact' (Davies 2007), nor, in most

cases, gamble what privileges remain by looking at ways to re-distribute resources that might actually support the autonomy of the communities the institutions purport to serve as venue for exhibition and education. If everything is to be open but the conditions of 'openness' itself, then whatever the destinies of critical institutions, and the critical practices they attempt to engage with, the institution of critique itself will flourish regardless of the outcome. 'Bourgeois theory is blind to the transitory nature of the current forms of social relations, takes for granted the basic unchangeability (the 'is-ness') of capitalist social relations' (Holloway 2002: 52; quoted in Gordon-Nesbitt 2005). Can we speak of what artist Chris Evans, in the title of one of his characteristically mordant social art projects, calls 'Militant Bourgeois'? The openness of the institution to art and/or activist practices that promote an oppositional political content or unorthodox/collective means of production becomes proof of the institution's support of those practices, which amounts to no more or less than the classic equivalence of revolution and commodity in an open market, even if an open 'marketplace of ideas' must disavow 'the market' in its more egregious forms. It also becomes proof of the institution, a 'heart in a heartless world' of art fairs, auction houses and concept stores. If artists then may hope 'to disclose the confinement rather than make illusions of freedom' (Smithson 1996: 155) the conditions under which that work is produced and shown will determine whether that disclosure is the last illusion of freedom left standing. Contemporary artists seem to be well aware of this paradox in some cases. In 'Working: a conversation between Andrea Geyer, Sharon Hayes, Ashley Hunt, Maryam Jafri, Kara Lynch, Ulrike Müller, Valerie Tevere, David Thorne and Alex Villar', David Thorne (also a member of the Speculative Archive group) says,

As much as I am drawn to artworks that operate to open up spaces of thought [...] as a way of generating important challenges to political debilitation, I also think such works risk generating a kind of confinement to or by these sorts of spaces of thought.

(Geyer et al. 2005)

It might be possible, though, to consider 'confinement' in Smithson's sense here; the notion of cultural confinement evokes the proliferation of ambiguity within well-defined parameters.

### **Heart of glass**

Hyrkania, an ancient kingdom in present-day Iran, was once the home of tigers. According to a medieval bestiary, if a man should wish to steal a tiger cub, he must take with him glass balls, and after stealing the cub throw the spheres in the path of the pursuing tigress. Taken in by her own reflection, the mother would curl herself around the ball to suckle her cub, thus losing both her revenge and the baby' (from a caption to *Hyrkania*, one of the paintings in the 'Brute Soul' series by Walton Ford, published in *Harper's Magazine*, August 2008).

So far I have been using the term critique rather abstractly. If the lineaments of the role of critique in the new institutional contexts I have been attempting to depict do not become clear, then the homoeopathic nature of

critique may seem inevitable rather than resulting from specific social, economic and political pressures. A recent intervention in the debate that may help to define the role of critique in contemporary art institutions comes from theorist and curator Irit Rogoff. In “‘Smuggling’ – An Embodied Criticality” (Rogoff 2006), she develops a typology of critical models available historically to institutional actors: ‘criticism’, ‘critique’ and ‘criticality’. For Rogoff, the former two have proven inadequate because criticism assumes a position of constituted authority which can exert judgement, while critique does this plus requiring an inside/outside model which operates as what has elsewhere been called a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ in order to perform its stated objectives, i.e. *reveal* ideologies or *challenge* assumptions. ‘Criticality’, she contends, eschews the problematic make-up of these strategies in favour of an ethics of ‘occupation’ which does not seek ‘resolution’ so much as a ‘heightened awareness’ of the tactical and theoretical compass available to cultural practitioners.

For the typology to be credible, a rather simplistic binary of inside/outside must be embraced that not only reduces the social and philosophical context of critique to an external positioning that courts irrelevance, but attributes effect (not to say affect) to being *inside* without specifying what this inside consists of. One could say that if critique is not just ‘critical distance’ but is staked on a relational dynamic with room for the proximity and contamination of subjects and objects of critique, criticality sloughs off this dialectic. A quick review of why this might be premature leads us to a rough and partial survey of critical models: the Kantian concept of critique as an investigation into the conditions of knowing, which tries to understand what types of judgement are possible under what circumstances; Adorno’s negative dialectics (Adorno 1973), more faithful to Kant than to Hegel in its withholding of positivity from judgements and its insistence on critique as a process without resolution where judgement (concept) and situation (object) never quite align, making change possible; and Marx’s critique of political economy, which tries to locate the conditions for thought in history, social relations and mode of production. All three of these tendencies may be described as ‘transcendental’ in that they ceaselessly question their conditions of possibility as ways of knowing, and the latter two ‘materialist’ in their refusal to abstract thought from its conditions of production. This results in a notion of critique as an analysis which is always implicated in its field, and a praxis which reflects the contingencies of its engagement. (It might be noted that with Robert Smithson, the conditions of thought were defined as entropic, or tending to chaotic dispersal, hence paradox became the (dis)organizing force in his cosmology. This has often been linked to the oblique approach to capitalist modernity known as ‘pataphysics’, or, the science of imaginary solutions.) Critique was and remains a vital ingredient of progressive politics that can in this short exposition be clustered under the rubric of ‘pre-figurative practices’ (Rowbotham et al. 1979) or ‘be the change you want to see’ which share a commitment to forms of life and modes of organization that try to put their critical principles into practice. This can be powerful if it translates into a politics of transversality which co-ordinates many different struggles although it also harbours the potential for the closures of ‘lifestyle politics’ or moralistic, individual-centred approaches which

disregard the materialist problematic of 'a free development of each is the condition for the free development of all' (Marx 1848).

However, if all this is jettisoned in the rush to conflate 'judgement' with 'exclusion', criticality undercuts its premises as a re-evaluation of the critical project by fetishising the complicity that must result from this move as 'embodiment'. It might seem more apt here to speak of 'embedded criticality', one that dreams opportunism as an aristocratic 'heightened sense of awareness' to be preferred over the mess of structural antagonisms and the ruptures that tangling with these can produce. Here it could be apt to cite another dissonance that comes out of this positioning – Rogoff would like to leave behind critique due not only to its limitations, but also to its embrace of power, the authority to judge, which places it on the same terrain as what it condemns. She proposes that the specific *liminality* of criticality provides better tools to intervene as 'a shift might occur that we generate through the modalities of...occupation rather than through a judgement'. Yet it might be relevant to consider that occupation is also a modality of power, the power that is exerted on the occupied from within their territory. It seems that Rogoff is in fact proposing a form of critique which is contingent on inhabiting institutions and speaking from their places of power, a form of critique which is contingent on the maintenance of that power and on the persistence of solidarity of the powerful with each other. It thus naturalizes the institution in its present form as the only possible vehicle for critique, much as the market is ideologically anointed as the only social arrangement that provides (if not realizes) the possibility of emancipation. By dismissing critique because it presumes to judge rather than participate, the gesture of criticality becomes structurally affirmative, but, significantly, not 'pre-critical' since it also has to assume the established value of critique as intellectual currency in the academy and related sites of cultural production. Thus, the formulation of criticality finds itself at ease in the conjuncture sketched out earlier. As already noted, the current climate in art and educational institutions is one where the conditions for the production of critique have become academicized in their accelerating detachment from the conditions that materially enable this critique to circulate – which ineluctably leads to either the well-meaning big-tent bad faith of 'the new institutionalism' or the more regressive but more Teflon position adopted by, e.g. Tate, ICA and art fairs, the one of neutral container. These exemplify two ways of responding to the slow implosion of art institutions: self-scrutiny or the redundancy of scruples.

But criticality's epistemic reach extends considerably further than a formalism of dissent in the cultural field. It harbours activist ambitions that take it beyond the emblematic and into the symptomatic. Rogoff posits the metaphor of 'smuggling' as a way in which the knowledge and practices that partake of criticality can circulate, which she compares to the clandestine networks of global migration or pirated goods:

So what are the principles by which this notion of 'smuggling' operates? Firstly it is a form of surreptitious transfer, of clandestine transfer from one realm into another. The passage of contraband from here to there is not sanctioned and does not have visible and available protocols to follow. Its workings embody a state of precariousness which is characteristic of many

facets of *our* current lives [Emphasis mine]. Smuggling operates as a principle of movement, of fluidity and of dissemination that disregards boundaries. Within this movement the identity of the objects themselves is obscured, they are not visible, identifiable....The line of smuggling does not work to retrace the old lines of existing divisions – but glides along them... ‘Smuggling’ exists in precisely such an illegitimate relation to a main event or a dominant economy without being in conflict with it and without producing a direct critical response to it.

(Rogoff 2006)

What emanates from this is not only the implausible analogy between the practices of ‘smugglers’ (migrants, workers, refugees) and the ‘gliding’ of research clusters in UK academic contexts, but also a striking overlap between the ideological coordinates of neoliberal dogma and criticality: mobility, adaptation, boundlessness. It is a familiar grammar of power, which sporadically adopts the strategies of the ‘weak’ as a means of legitimation, either by invoking the socially marginal symbolically, or by disregarding power differentials in promoting strategies of flexibility and evasion which can only tend to affirm domination when such differentials are not taken into social and historical account. The vibrancy of critique in the academy is sustained by semiotic plunder of ‘embodied’ social facts that could not be more disparate from the realities they are called upon to replenish. There is inevitably a domestication, and the smuggling takes on the character more of the kind of equivocal mimicry of subcultures by dominant cultures in order to emphasize, e.g. their universality – it is as if the adoption of black popular culture by the white mainstream, or the commodification of radical histories (Che Guevara merchandise) were held to be unequivocally progressive, rather than emblematic of the power of capital to render such barriers obsolete. Just as market discipline creates a ‘smooth’ space for its commodities and a lethally striated space for their producers – the global conditions for the smuggling of migrant labour and its super-exploitation by disavowing and imprisoning it at the same time – so criticality is caught up in a cycle of repudiating its grounds for existence in its refusal of systemic critique while affirming these grounds in its desire to emulate them tactically. Moreover, it repeats the idealistic error characteristic of academic cultural studies that sees ‘boundaries’ as semiotic prejudices rather than material facts, taking the signs of injustice for injustice as such, provoking solely discursive remedies. If judgement is suspended by the advent of participatory criticality over distanced critique, things can indefinitely be left open, leaving an ambiguity productive for both the bastions of criticality and the targets of this criticality, insofar as the targets can still be identified.

Finally, at a broader diagnostic level, the propositions of criticality dovetail gracefully with those of ‘relational aesthetics’, which likewise pins its colours on an occupation of crevices within the system, lest too direct a practical criticism of the system’s architecture prompts expulsion. This is the animating principle of statements such as

Social utopias and revolutionary hopes have given way to everyday micro-utopias and imitative strategies, any stance that is ‘directly’ critical of society

is futile, if based on the illusion of a marginality that is nowadays impossible not to say regressive.

(Bourriaud 2002: 31)

As a political claim, this is insipid; micro-utopias can only generate alibis for a domination that hardly needs them, and to conflate directness with marginality could in no way be assigned to a utopian thinking, however 'micro-' in scale, evoking as it does the bluster of reaction through the ages. As a claim of institutional critique, it is as true and as trivial as any such claim made in the present. As an aesthetic claim, it can only be evaluated nominalistically, with reference to particular instances of work, which is neither Bourriaud's purpose here nor mine.

But what micro-utopias do set out to perform is participation. Participation, likewise, can be seen as a technology of critique, or a criticality that obviates a confrontation with structural antagonism and social injustice, or even the question of alternatives, in favour of a constructive exchange with the given state of affairs. In this it finds itself aligned with the careful avoidance of contradictions and the managerialism that has emerged as the dominant cultural logic in corporate, governmental and non-governmental ('third sector') spheres of operation, reproduced by the art institutions that find themselves at the intersections of these spheres. The palliative ends of cultural deployments of criticality and participation highlight the reciprocity between the normativity of dissent and the acceptability of control.

## This will not happen without you

Thus, it is important to keep in mind that the dynamics of the system have been maintained due to its ability to reflect upon itself critically. Therefore, the more critically you alienate yourself from the system, the more you're an artist. The more you reveal that contemporary institutions are not relevant to your experience (even if your experience is the experience of art), the more you become a bearer of aesthetic values.'

(Viktor Misiano, from 'The institutionalization of friendship (S23M remix)'  
posted to Sarai Reader-List 27 Aug 2008 by Jeebesh Bagchi, Raqs Media Collective)

Cybernetics is the study of systems and processes that interact with themselves and produce themselves from themselves.

(Louis Kauffman, President of the American Society  
for Cybernetics, online CYBCON discussion group)

In his 1974 book, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: the Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*, Harry Braverman takes an excursion into a focus-group kitchen in order to make a point about how management theory has come to counsel participation as a nostrum for strengthening control in workplaces infected by that era's emancipatory ideals. He describes the case of the baking-mix manufacturers who were able to boost sales for their product by removing powdered egg from their mixtures, restoring a sense of agency to the housewife who could add an egg (Braverman 1974: 39). The context would have been one of factory employers hoping to revive stagnant profitability and combat chronically high levels of militancy, sabotage and absenteeism by enacting

some semblance of autonomy for workers in the manufacturing process, which frequently meant self-monitoring, competitive 'quality circles' and the like. But whether viewed as an example of classic cybernetic 'feedback' or a prescient version of customization, the baking-mix-egg-housewife assemblage is also a sterling fable about the immanence of control to agency in a 'closed system'. 'First-order' cybernetics, by definition, can only study closed systems, 'second-order' cybernetics attempted to comprehend 'open systems'; yet, as 'open' a system as capitalism may be in certain other of its axiomatics, we can here consider it as closed to modes of existence which are not realized through waged labour, consumption and class division. This is not to imply that the story of the baking-mix could not have other social implications, but its apocryphal impact relies on the subtle trade-offs it sketches between consumption and confinement, labour and love. It is also, of course, a very neat encapsulation of the feedback principle at work, a principle that comes to stand in for 'democracy' in the truncated imaginary of politics-by-management.

The notion of feedback became ubiquitous from the late 1960s to mid-1970s for many of the same reasons that participation has achieved prominence today. For many artists, activists and progressives of all stripes, cybernetics testified to the interconnectedness of all 'systems' that composed an irremediably complex world, in which all actions could only be performed in a state of reflexive self-awareness of their possible consequences (feedback), and any behaviour or ideology that led to separation, hostility or withdrawal over engagement was *prima facie* suicidal. Although this set of beliefs could pass into quietist or mystical approaches, it did have a definite materialist component when set against the backdrop of the Cold War. Cybernetics also inspired a lot of the era's media activism. On a different note, custodians of what was then known as the system (the cybernetics lexicon again) such as economists, military planners, civil servants and management theorists were also fascinated by cybernetics in the vision that it offered them of a social field that could be mapped and organized according to relatively simple engineering principles that assumed homeostasis or equilibrium as the desired outcome – which would also be very desirable as an outcome for those in power during a time when western cities were regularly being turned upside down by the loose variables in the system. As a corollary of cybernetics, game theory also came into its own as a means of predicting and managing chaotic scenarios in the re-invention of military tactics prompted by the attritive conduct of the Vietnam War, later adapted to civil and economic spheres of governance, and evolving rapidly in the present conduct of wars and economies with newer technologies of scenario modelling, surveillance and data analysis.

These two divergent vectors of the popularization of cybernetics would in subsequent decades converge in aspects of what has been called the 'military-industrial-entertainment' complex – the permeation of social life by militaristic protocols and subjectivities which are also integrated into new models for accumulation, knowledge and urbanism – a terrain which is being insightfully excavated by Brian Holmes, among others (Holmes 2007, 2008). Yet although one does not hear much about cybernetics anymore, outside of historical or media arts theory contexts, one does hear a great deal about participation. Participation as it has been theorized in social science and economics, bears a distinct influence of cybernetics in its approach to the distribution of decision-making power as a technical matter.

It sees questions of politics or justice as merely incidental to the overriding goal of 'effective' participation by all agents in decision-making insofar as they are affected by the decisions made. What this assumes is that the optimization of the system that dictates the horizon of available decisions is a desired goal for all participants, and that the resulting social control can be compatible with both egalitarianism and particularity (or 'diversity'). Further, it is a set of proposals which assumes what it sets out to achieve, namely, the involvement of rational, equally 'empowered' actors, which also recalls the 'rational choice' theory integral to market dogmatism.

Operationally, what makes participation and its corollary, empowerment, attractive to governmental, business and civil society entities is its promise of overcoming divisions between governors and governed without invoking conflict or radical modification of the existing arrangements; if everyone is participating, and no one is left out, then how can there be any grievance? The take-up of participation on this level of course marks a recuperation of grassroots pressure for accountability and responsiveness from aloof and technocratic bureaucracies and corporations as well as the earlier-cited disengagement in the workplace. By effectively linking the worker or 'user' of social services into her own exploitation/management, the discourse of participation gets the individual or group to identify with the goals of the institution insofar as he/she/they are 'participating' in its fate. This feedback loop likewise plays out in the remits of art funding agencies and art institutions, similarly harried to or desirous of closing the gap between themselves and their former publics and current users. But at a less calculating level, there have been quite a number of curatorial and critical attempts to revive a radical legacy from the past several decades under the rubric of participation, linking it to performance, civil disobedience, street theatre and other institutional and para-institutional critique. Well-known examples include *The Interventionists* (MassMOCA, 2004), *Forms of Resistance* (Van Abbemuseum, 2007), *Populism* (CAC Vilnius; National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam and Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt, 2005) and *The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now* (SF MOMA, 2008).

There have also been critical accounts of this tendency, including Claire Bishop's (Bishop 2004, 2006) which have taken well-known approaches to participation in art such as relational aesthetics and 'socially engaged practice' to task for their insufficient appreciation of antagonism and conflict as a fact of social interaction and the mimetic relation of these strategies to the service industries that are transfiguring the role of art and institutions. Inarguable as those points may be, what Bishop's critique misses, notably, is the structural role of participation that these strategies fulfil for institutions. This is an aspect which is hard to challenge from the perspective of aesthetics (which Bishop tries to do), since 'relational aesthetics' was always poised as a generically 'post-conceptual' set of practices, and it has often been argued, by Benjamin Buchloh, Thierry de Duve and others, that the 'conceptual reduction' has rendered formalist aesthetics beside the point when it comes to the formulation and assessment of art practices. Moreover, that structural role is oblique and contradictory, but insofar as it is appreciably functioning, it requires a materialist critique that is not content with pointing at the empty place of 'politics' that allegedly conciliatory art would yearn to

paper over; in fact, its critical *content* is not greatly relevant. Although Bishop precisely diagnoses some of the larger social transformations that she sees 'relational aesthetics' equivocally mimicking (the eclipse of industrial production by services, the quenching of political antagonism in micropolitics and consumerism), she would only need to go a little further to extend these analyses. The functionality of relational aesthetics for the institutions of art is the single outcome of decades of intransigent 'institutional critique' that best aligns with the conflict avoidance cited by Bishop as key to the critical and aesthetic shortcomings of this type of work (or to its theorization by Bourriaud and the take-up of that discourse). Its renegotiation of site from place to category of meaning, which is what fixes it in the post-conceptual reference, provides an alibi for institutions to displace themselves as well, from place or container of practices to condition of possibility for them. Participation, like criticality, can be a homeostatic strategy that reflects at once a melancholy that change is no longer possible (or conceivable within art systems) hope that the change can be kept alive by the circulation of discourse about it, and eagerness to composite the fraying strands of legitimacy available to art institutions by providing a platform of sanctioned subversion. While there is an argument to be made for exposure and dissemination of critical strategies to the larger audiences that art institutions have the power to attract, the argument for communication and against insularity is damaged when these strategies generally keep circulating amongst a specific public, however, they are parsed by the instrumental agendas of bureaucratic inclusion criteria. But more signally, so long as these strategies do not turn to address the social and corporeal mechanisms that animate institutions from day to day in a way that neither glorifies the critical stature of the institution nor pedantically re-animates institutional critique devices of yore, they are always exposed to charges of academicism. This is particularly poignant in instances when large institutions which do not ordinarily see themselves as holding a reflexive or self-critical remit stage programming that explores ideas of participation – it is of course possible that we all missed the conference on strategies of participation held at Tate Modern triggered by the still-ongoing cleaners' strike there.

Further, the role of participation in legitimating existing systems or proposing minor changes that enhance systemic stability is a key principle of cybernetics inasmuch as the system in question is a closed one. Art institutions can be considered closed systems to the degree that they produce and reproduce the meanings that circulate within them as a self-referential taxonomy which signifies that anything that appears within that system is converted into art by the sheer fact of its appearance in proximity to other objects so designated – the conceptual reduction that came as the long-latent appraisal of Duchamp in the 1960s. There is nothing evidently problematic about this, if we think of contemporary social life as containing a plurality of such opaque and self-contained systems (Luhmann: 2000). And yet, if these self-referential systems (art, but also science, and any other number of disciplines) all open up into one overdetermining closed system – capital – then indeed any initiatives to interrogate closure or perform openness within one of the sub-systems must reckon with the formalist character of such challenges within the overall closure that the constitution of social life by capital enforces.

## Maladaptation and lost situations

The system with corrective feedback is intended to work on nothing but success and failure, and failure means that the pattern of switching will be disrupted, so that if the organism has the wrong ideas, the wrong ideas will be knocked out.

(W. Ross Ashby, 'Homoeostasis', paper delivered at the Macy Conference, 1952)

This causes acute anxiety among artists, in so far as they challenge, compete, and fight for the spoiled ideals of lost situations.'

(Smithson 1996)

It is neither difficult nor especially groundbreaking to knit instances of naivete and opportunism into a structural logic of disavowal which then becomes the received wisdom and the baseline to any debate addressing one or another of its consequences. But the mode of immanent critique, which this essay has attempted to counterpoise to the mode of criticality, whether embodied or free-floating, needs to do more. Like Marx's critique of political economy, it needs to

locate itself as a historically determinate aspect of that which it examines rather than as a transhistorically valid positive science that constitutes a historically unique (hence spurious) exception standing above the interaction of social forms and forms of consciousness it analyses.

(Postone 1993: 143)

To reckon with that demand, an analysis of the desires that underpin the material formations of discourse, realized and implicit, in its ideological and its critical moments, is in order. While this is perhaps substantial enough for a longer examination, a few points can be synthesized already. These can be found in the notion of aesthetic freedom, which is rigged up to the much larger and more vexed apparatus of 'autonomy'.

In the Romantic and early modern development of the concept of the individual, free-market doctrine and the laws of bohemia had a common ground in that each saw the free self-development of the individual as contingent on liberation from communal constraints. At the same time, in reaction, there was an impulse to consolidate another kind of community than the one offered by the dominant culture, whether this be a community of revolutionary transgression or simply elaboration of other forms of life held together by aesthetic, spiritual or social programmes. Thus it would be important to chart a historical trajectory of the vicissitudes of freedom in modernist and later ideological formations in art worlds. However, as abstractions, freedom and unfreedom as co-ordinates of aesthetic judgement had already been charted by Kant as the oscillation between autonomy and heteronomy, later repurposed by Marxist critical theorists such as Adorno as the central political axis of industrial culture and high modernism, and in the present, by Ranciere to describe the political implications of the 'aesthetic regime'. If freedom is a common place between art and capital, then one can always mobilize a critique of 'freedom deficit' against the other, which is familiar from contemporary attacks from culture bureaucrats and journalists about the hermetic quality of contemporary art,

and the attack from artists, institutions and critics that populist policies premised on commodification undermine the freedom of the arts. On a minor circuit within this, the controversy is replicated between institutions that are stipulated to mediate 'access' to aesthetic freedom to the largest and most diverse constituencies, and artists who see this as instrumentalization of the properly 'negative' or undetermined/critical (critical because undetermined) space of freedom afforded to the artist. But so long as freedom is the hobby-horse pertinent to both (caricatured) positions – the one of market freedom, and the one of aesthetic freedom – then the closures I have depicted above of institutions jockeying to preserve some form of legitimacy and agency, even if it means rallying to the long-dismantled ramparts of a bourgeois public sphere', will continue to be reproduced. A certain tendency can be discerned in both dispositions. This is the tendency of an abstract and legalistic concept of freedom. Such a concept of freedom is not vitiated by the complexity and specificity of critical debates staged in art institutions, which of course are often working with other concepts of freedom, because the self-understanding of the institution as an entity and an agent in a cultural sphere as currently constituted presupposes an abstract concept of freedom, of the 'laboratory', of a provisionally detached sphere where 'things' can 'happen'. Ineluctably, whatever the intentions of the various participants, this leads to the tautology that 'art is good'. Self-referentiality and an abstractly benevolent (rather than a negative) space of freedom produce a virtuous cycle which can, and does, enact a *perpetuum mobile*, given changing theoretical fashions and current events. But could the ideology of freedom perhaps generate other scenarios than this? Could the desires that circulate along its cul-de-sacs be diverted elsewhere?

What has been largely at issue so far is the productivity of critique with respect to its structural functions and stated goals. Cybernetics has been utilized as one filter that can depict the convergence of freedom and unfreedom in the system's requirement of feedback or participation. As cybernetics is primarily a theory of homeostasis, the productivity of critique (here I mean 'productivity' as critique, rather than as feedback) may then be less connected to feedback than to maladaptation, what prompts rejection by the system, the 'wrong ideas' that will be 'knocked out', as per Ashby. Here we could put forward several hypotheses, stemming from the foregoing. One would be that instances of critique can be deduced through their discordance with normative protocols of criticality and through their willingness to approach 'culture' and 'art' as contested terms. As a necessary, though not sufficient, index for when critique is happening, we can look at cases where critique runs up against fundamental structural contradictions in its sphere of operations and faces a violent reaction by the paymasters. A means of doing this could be to look at the ways in which the insistence that the referents of critique be local, well-known and accountable seems to exceed homeostatic tolerance levels. A recent case that comes to mind is the legal challenge served to Variant magazine by the private charity that has taken over Glasgow's cultural provision, Culture & Sport Glasgow, following the publication of an article looking into the manifold overlapping interests of C&SG board members and property development, tourism and other neoliberal city-boosting cartels engaged in rehauling the city as magnet for tourism and conventions rather than culture. Copies of the magazine

were also summarily removed from C&SG-run venues. Another was the cancellation of a protest orchestrated as a response to a Dutch yuletide tradition that happily invokes the colonial legacy and slavery through extensive use of blackface and ethnic stereotype. The protest was set to unfold as an event, already fictionalised as a sequence in a longer film, to take place within a programme of events and exhibition dealing with the implications of Dutch identity politics and nationalism, but perhaps was deemed to be a bridge too far in mining local sensitivities – despite working with local anti-racism groups. In the latter incident especially, there is clearly an element of ‘protocol violation’; it is never a straightforward clash of principles, more an unwritten infraction of social *habitus*, expressed or accounted for as personal disagreement, with outcomes to be expected given the power differential between the disagreeing parties; it can also be limited to a technical issue – code violations or safety concerns (in the Dutch case, the police simply withdrew from the planned protest). Tellingly, it emerged that the museum’s director, taken aback at the furore unleashed by the event, chided the artists for taking the museum for a ‘space of action’ when it was really a ‘space for reflection’; it is all very well to be critical, but you really shouldn’t take the critique for a walk.’

A further hypothesis is that instances of critique operating with proximity to institutional resources can sustain their position by exploiting the ideology of freedom, and develop their relevance with transversal links and solidarities. This hypothesis is maybe particularly suited to sites of critical knowledge production that are operating in academic contexts, wherein the pressure to tabulate activities as measurable research outcomes engenders a corresponding pressure to maximize loopholes. Here the ideology of aesthetic or academic freedom can be exercised tactically to build concerted challenges to the principles of value production as they are inculcated in the academic realm, generally as direct translation from how they are applied at their corporate or policy origins. Via this knowing appropriation of ideologies of freedom to further emancipatory ends, the standard of ‘exceptionality’ can be hoisted only if the aim is to dissolve and re-compose the relation of such sites to other forms of social organization, knowledge and action that do not inhere in institutional contexts – but may benefit from institutional resources.

We could also venture that the ideology of freedom can imply a peculiar process of radicalization; whereas other sectors of waged labour are already starting from a clear contractual relation with exploitation and resignation to this, the mystified conditions of production faced by cultural workers can be taken literally as a strategy to deepen a critique of the social division of labour and the distribution of symbolic and material capital. In terms of the cybernetic paradigm delineated earlier, this could be glossed as adopting a strategy of maladaptation in the sense that feedback can reach a point where it is generating more noise than the system as currently constituted can manage or optimize for its own ends, thus broaching a point of indistinction between feedback and a new system – the system that the feedback may propose when it overwhelms the system’s integrative capacities. This would of course hinge on a realization of a common project, which is in doubt under present circumstances, as well as being a thought categorically excluded by the ideology of freedom as it stands, which is primarily a notion of self-development, with a vague remainder of universality. Yet it is historically valid,

at least, to make this hypothesis, as it has been shown that in times of widespread social disturbance, such as late 1960s to early 1970s New York or early 2000s Argentina, to take just a couple of renowned examples, fields of cultural production were also subject to forms of collective refusal and demands. These generally proceeded from an embrace of the 'ideological' freedom proper to the domain of art as a basis for elaborating demands both specific to the sector (equitable representation policies, improved pay and working conditions better negotiating position for artists) and general to social movements (feminism, anti-racism, anti-war, anti-imperialism; solidarity with broader political goals). As the 'cultural exception' to the rule of the market, the sphere of art and knowledge production may be best poised to demonstrate not only the granted affiliation between ideological freedom and generalized unfreedom inherent to the logic of exceptionality, and the practical inscription of exceptionality into the value-form as usual anyway, but also the desire for that exceptionality to become common. Here Smithson's ironic reference to 'lost situations' although it could evoke equally well the current phalanx of modernist revivalisms, could also point out situations lost to thought, lost to history, unknown to the existing methods of seeking these lost situations – because they can only be found and constructed out of the impasses and contingencies of the present.

What could also be pertinent here is a reflection on socio-political milieus and the differences among them, which can be eclipsed in by the homogeneity of culture/capital synthesis in Western Europe. When practitioners of critique are exposed to direct juridical repression, not to mention day-to-day marginality, the role of critique can no longer be said to be homoeopathic. Instead it sets out for a fraught encounter with 'truth' which could not be stated analogously in more 'liberal' regimes. The truth at issue here is what critique is signalling when it is prevented from circulating; yet it could be said that the inflated circulation of critique elsewhere points to another kind of truth. In their June 2008 conversation 'On Practice and Critique' (Vilensky and Bibkov 2008), Russian artist and activist Dmitry Vilensky and academic and activist Alexander Bibkov, Vilensky says:

So if you translate a lot of the work we do into an international context, it could be described with the old feminist term of 'consciousness raising practices'. But at the same time, you can't compare these practices to their Western version, because in Russia, such 'innocent' activity constantly faces sanctions from a repressive state, which takes all critical claims very seriously and works to destroy them through traditional despotism. This gives critical work a different intensity and highlights criticism's meaning as the truth about power, revealing it to be a grey, untalented machine of repression that produces nothing itself but strangles everything alive.

(Vilensky 2008)

Several months later, the publication of Vilensky's group, *Chto Delat?* (*What Is to Be Done?*) was seized in a crackdown on small printing house in St Petersburg whose clientèle included a cross-section of small, anti-capitalist and oppositional groups in Russia, while another activist was arrested and briefly detained under anti-terrorism laws, and Vilensky brought in for questioning.

Later in the interview, Vilensky inserts a concept of truth and 'domains' derived from Alain Badiou in his notion of what distinguishes critique that comes from the cultural field:

Workers today can only demand an improvement in working conditions, but they cannot say 'Your Ford Fiesta is a piece of shit, this isn't the car I want to build'. Our situation is different. Of course, we can and should call for an improvement of our working conditions (this is a very basic demand), but the main thing we are saying is that we need a completely different kind of knowledge. The knowledge we have now does not correspond to the tasks that society faces. It has nothing to do with the truth in science or art, and moreover, it is completely detached from the real contradictions that take place between the sphere of work. That is, we need to critically rethink the materiality of a new world, a world undergoing deep transformation, and to join all the oppressed in making an applicable theory that is capable of unifying a fundamental critique with a new form of practice.

(Vilensky 2008)

And yet, however pliant and accommodating the circuits of criticality in the West may be, they are manifestly not infinite in their capacity to represent and placate, embedded as they are in structures of finance, legitimation and policy that do foreclose certain types of activities, and regularly prove their detachment from their 'occupied' grounds of criticality. Whatever the historical and philosophical modalities of critique, the contradictions that constitute it as a mode of production are always intensely political. In the current conjuncture of 'crisis' of more than just financial capital, it could be proposed that positive elaborations must somehow take seriously the condition of rupture and break as an opening for detaching and constituting on other grounds rather than 'occupying'. It would be worth taking that detachment as one of the central material conditions for the intensification of critique Vilensky is calling for; an intensification which does not have to yield in exquisiteness to anything currently on the market.

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