Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists’ Writings


Reviewed by Amy Ione, The DIAtrbe Institute, Berkeley, CA 94704, U.S.A. E-mail: aione@diatribe.com.

Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists’ Writings brings together key documents related to institutional critique, a conceptual art movement that has raised questions about the workings of art institutions (museums, galleries) since the 1980s. Alexander Alberro (one of the editors of this volume) calls it a “gesture of negation” (p. 3) that was adopted by art-world figures as they began to critically engage with the order of things within art venues. The anthology presents the movement in four sections (Framing, Institutional Art, Institutionalizing and Exit Strategies). While the volume gives the impression that the critique is ongoing, the Exit Strategies section suggests that the initial concerns have morphed into something else.

The Framing section centers on how artists began to expose the politics of art institutions along with various inconsistencies and contradictions in their operations in the 1960s and 1970s. Hans Haacke’s response to the Guggenheim’s abrupt cancellation of his scheduled show in 1971, due to its political content, is included here. Overall, these early documents present general challenges to the status quo.

Ultimately, there was a shift in strategy that is covered in the second section, the Institution of Art. This section covers how the art world operates and assumptions people bring to art. For example, the Guerrilla Girls, who first surfaced in New York City in 1985 to protest gender and racial inequality in the art world, are included in the second section as well as the third, Institutionalizing, which asks how artists can develop an alternative sphere. The final section, Exit Strategies, “brings together art projects and writings that stem from international collective whose radical agendas and cultural politics resonate with earlier forms of institutional critique but reject significant parts of its legacy” (p. 15). In reading the book, I was struck by the fact that the majority of the writings appear in the first two sections (314 pages), while the last two sections seem more of an afterthought. Among the artists/authors included are Hans Haacke, Michael Asher, Robert Smithson, Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, Dan Graham, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Adrian Piper, Martha Rosler, Louise Lawler, Fred Wilson and Mark Dion.

To my surprise, I was quite taken in by the book but quite exasperated at the same time. This is because it is an insiders’ book. The editors seem to assume that readers will know who all the artists are and how their writings “fit” together within the art world at large. Thus, there are no short artist biographies, no summaries to contextualize the writings and no index to help the reader move around expeditiously. The lack of supplementary material to enhance the reader’s understanding of the writings presented makes it useful documentation for a classroom, where a teacher can provide framing, but less useful in a general sense. For example, the Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) article, titled “Tactical Media,” was penned in 1996, before Steve Kurtz became the target of an FBI investigation. Gregg Bordowitz’s 2004 article (“Tactics Inside and Out”) is more useful for understanding the trajectory of CAE and their projects. An index would help a reader who is interested in CAE but not planning on reading the entire book easily discover materials about CAE outside of the article credited to CAE.

Moreover, although the authors claim the volume is a self-contained work, this is not really the case. The five Hans Haacke articles demonstrate that he has played a strong part in institutional critique. Yet, his work is not given in the context of his life. For example, one of the reasons he was able to continue to make political statements is that he had an economic base. From 1967 to 2002 Haacke had stable employment as a professor at Cooper Union in New York City. This “larger context” invisibility problem struck me frequently. Martha Rosler, for example, hardly seems like an “outsider.” She has taught at several universities and (among other things) serves in an advisory capacity to the departments of education at the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Museum of Modern Art and the Center for Urban Pedagogy and is a former board member of the Buell Center for the Study of American Architecture at Columbia University.

Andrea Fraser, another person who critiques art institutions, is currently a member of the Art Department faculty at the University of California, Los Angeles. In her articles, she mentions her discussions as a student in New York City with many of the contributors to the book. While her writings are included in the book, her well-known performance pieces are largely invisible. For example, there is no mention of one of her most controversial pieces: the videotape she made of herself having sex with an art collector. He paid $20,000 to participate in this work of art. After their encounter, the video was shown in a gallery in NYC. According to Fraser, her point in making this artwork was to comment on the reality that selling art is comparable to prostitution.

Fraser herself, however, does acknowledge the contradiction of participating in a critique that is a part of
the museum/gallery system. One chapter in the book reprints a 2005 Artforum article where she wrote:

Nearly 40 years after their first appearance, the practices now associated with "institutional critique" have for many come to seem, well, institutionalized… In the context of museum exhibitions and art history symposia… one increasingly finds institutional critique accorded the unquestioning respect often granted artistic phenomena that have achieved a certain historical status (p. 408).

In this sense, our contemporary institutional critique is a part of a long and fascinating history (although this history is not mentioned in the book). Other examples of critique from within institutions are the Pre-Raphaelites in England and the Realists in France (Gustave Courbet, Jean-François Millet and Édouard Manet). Alternate exhibition venues by people such as the Impressionists have also challenged the status quo. While this anthology does not look at historical precursors, the documents do offer a record that is of value as this movement takes its place in the chronology of art. Still, it is a shame that this volume does not acknowledge that, although this iteration takes place in the museums and galleries, rather than outside the mainstream, there are historical examples that show other routes.

As I read, I kept thinking about the 2004 College Art Association (CAA) Conference, where the Frank Jewett Mather Award was given to the Guerrilla Girls. This CAA award recognizes published art criticism that has appeared in whole or in part in North American publications. Their choice of the Guerrilla Girls was explained in the following statement:

During the past nineteen years, the Guerrilla Girls' work has dramatically affected curators, administrators, fellow critics, and artists. Prior to their poster campaigns in the streets of SoHo in the mid-1980s, the reality of art-world exclusiveness—whether overt or covert—with regard to gender and race was almost entirely anecdotal. The Guerrilla Girls' statistics exposed imbalances in gallery and museum representation, media coverage, and other forms of institutional support for artists. The Guerrilla Girls' posters now appear in art-history textbooks and are collected by museums across the country, and the group has received awards from the National Organization for Women, the National Library Association, the Center for the Study of Political Graphics, and the Ministry of Culture in Berlin, among others [1].

Later, in 2009, the Guerrilla Girls added CAA's inaugural Distinguished Feminist Award to their accolades. According to CAA, these activists "embody the very essence of the spirit of the feminist art world: collaborative, proactive, and persistent" [2]. In other words, the activities of this group, like those of most (if not all) of the sources in the book, are now so fully integrated into the institutions that the criticisms they are noted for seem almost incestuous. Several of the articles in Institutional Critique reference Hans Haacke's 1972 poll/piece at the John Weber gallery that revealed, among other things, that most visitors to the gallery were related in some way to the professions of art, art teaching and museology. This book is directed at the same group. The language is specialist language and does not lend itself to dialogue with those who may feel alienated and/or marginalized from the "high art" world that critiques this defines viability in the marketplace.

In 2004, as I watched the Guerrilla Girls walk to the stage at the CAA conference, wearing the gorilla masks they use to keep their anonymity, I remember thinking of a statement Max Planck made in his autobiography:

[A] new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die, and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it [3].

Institutional Critique brings this to mind. Its subject has no doubt changed the art world, and for the better in many cases. While I am not a fan of the "high art" critique, this volume nevertheless is a contribution that will aid the study of art. Still, all in all, the most striking thing about the book was how well it aligned with Haacke's poll. Just as the majority of the visitors to the gallery were somehow in the art world already, the writings in this book are for those who are already participants in the art institutions. It is not an effort to reach the public at large. Yet, perhaps ironically, it ends with some discussion on how art projects are now expanding into a larger arena.

References
1. <www.collegeart.org/awards/mather2004b>
2. <www.collegeart.org/awards/feminist2009c>