



Critical Institutional Analysis of Contemporary Art: From Radical Museum Critique to Alternative Strategies in Museology

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Abstract

The dominance of art institutions over the art world became a significant and challenging issue for preserving the freedom and independence of art and artists from the early 1960s onward. Avant-garde artists of this period—especially those associated with various conceptual art movements—emphasized the necessity of recognizing the decisive role of museums and the need to limit their boundaries. The radical activities of these artists, often arising from a position of “negation,” led to actions that came to be known under the general title of “institutional critique.” However, confronting the role of museums and art institutions in general could not sustain the emancipatory and consciousness-raising effects of institutional critique to the extent necessary to reliably guarantee artistic freedom. Weakening art institutions ultimately reduced support for art and artists’ rights. This crisis, along with the dilemma concerning the future of art, artists, and art institutions—including museums—compelled stakeholders to search for alternative strategies. The aim of this article is to identify alternative institutional strategies for contemporary art and to examine solutions addressing the limitations of institutional critique.

Keywords: Institutional Art, Museum, Contemporary Art, Institutional Critique, Institutional Intervention, Alternative Museology.

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Introduction

The theoretical foundations of institutional critique emerge from institutional theory in art, which emphasizes that what defines an artwork is not its visible characteristics but the context in which it is presented and recognized. The theory underscores that certain individuals within society possess the authority to confer the status of “artwork” upon an object. Thus, the determining factor in recognizing whether something is art lies in its history of reception and institutional framing, rather than in its perceptible qualities.

George Dickie’s institutional theory was influenced by Arthur Danto’s essay “The Artworld,” which argued that the difference between Andy Warhol’s Brillo Boxes and actual Brillo soap boxes lies not in their material appearance but in the philosophical and conceptual framework that grants them meaning.

Jonathan Harris reminds us that institutions never adopt a neutral position; rather, they operate ideologically, connected to the activities, attitudes, and values of particular groups. Therefore, when encountering art in contexts of distribution and display, one must understand that art institutions are not neutral platforms. They organize, regulate, empower, or exclude both “people” and “art” according to various motivations.

After the end of the Cold War and amid global economic transformations, criticism of institutional theory intensified. Commercial galleries gained unprecedented influence, shaping the economic structure of contemporary art to such an extent that participation in the market began to confer greater prestige than national galleries or international biennials.

Rosalind Krauss predicted that in the “late capitalist museum,” surplus capital would shape museum collections and artistic production. Museums increasingly adopted investment-like models aligned with art markets rather than functioning as purely cultural institutions.

These structural limitations and the dominance of institutional power were perceived by many artists as threats to artistic freedom, ultimately giving rise to radical movements that fundamentally questioned the legitimacy of museums and art institutions.

Research Methodology

The article adopts a theoretical–analytical, and interpretive approach grounded in critical institutional theory and museum studies. It relies on documentary research, theoretical analysis, and case examination of museum practices.

The study analyzes:

- Institutional theory in art (Dickie, Danto)
- Critical perspectives on museums (Krauss, Alberro)
- Radical institutional critique movements of the 1960s onward
- Alternative museological strategies implemented in institutions such as Reina Sofía and the Van Abbemuseum

By synthesizing theoretical discourse and practical case studies, the article evaluates the limitations of radical negation and proposes constructive institutional alternatives.

Discussion

1. From Institutional Theory to Institutional Critique

Institutional theory shifted attention from the intrinsic qualities of artworks to the systems that validate them. However, this theoretical insight soon transformed into artistic activism. Conceptual artists began exposing the ideological frameworks embedded in museum structures. Museums were revealed not as neutral containers but as producers of meaning and power.

Artists such as Marcel Broodthaers focused on the museum as an inherently ideological structure composed of cultural, political, and social elements.

His strategy involved exploiting the museum’s internal contradictions to critique it from within.

2. Radical Negation and Its Limits

The radical critique of museums often took the form of negation—rejecting institutional authority altogether. However, complete rejection proved problematic. Weakening institutions reduced financial and structural support for artists. The paradox emerged: dismantling institutions risked undermining the very ecosystem sustaining art.

Rosalind Krauss's analysis of the late capitalist museum further demonstrated that museums had already adapted to market forces.

Pure negation was insufficient in confronting such systemic integration with capitalism.

3. The Body, Archive, and Repetition as Alternative Strategies

The shift toward alternative strategies is visible in museum practices such as those at Museo Reina Sofía. The body became central—politically and socially—reflecting second-wave feminism, performance art, and postcolonial struggles.

Museums adopted:

- Decentering visual cognition and engaging the whole body
- Emphasizing artistic process over objecthood
- Redefining art as document and archive
- Using repetition as a curatorial strategy
- Promoting critical public education

The eighteen-month program “Play Van Abbe” exemplified such experimentation. It divided the museum's collection into thematic sections, questioning who constructs museum narratives and how historical narratives shift over time.

Rather than rejecting the museum, these strategies restructured it internally—transforming it into a self-critical, anti-capitalist, and reflexive institution.

4. Anti-Capitalist Resistance and Self-Critique

Museums such as Reina Sofía adopted anti-colonial reinterpretations of history, placing Spanish history within broader international frameworks.

Similarly, the Ljubljana Museum resisted capitalist stagnation and presentism by reactivating historical narratives through repetition and re-creation.

These examples illustrate a transition from destruction to transformation—from external critique to internal restructuring.

Conclusion

Conceptual art, by rejecting any fixed rule that defined its essence or attributed objective and distinctive characteristics to it, transformed art into something relative, elusive, and inaccessible. Art altered its form according to context to protect itself from the danger of subjugation and appropriation by other domains—domains to which the custodians of art institutions had now also aligned themselves. Nevertheless, revolutionary tension could not continue to such an extent that contemporary art and artists would be left without any secure refuge, and their very existence would be placed at risk.

Within the dialectical trajectory of institutional transformations in art, as expected, the critical reassessment undertaken by leading artists and thinkers regarding the potentialities of institutions—especially museums—offered constructive strategies and responses to the fundamental question: *Where is the free realm of art?* How can art resist, remain independent, and preserve its autonomous position of critique and interrogation in an era in which modern capitalism has absorbed nearly all spheres of human life?

The limitations created by the power and interests of art institutions were perceived by many artists as threats to artistic freedom, ultimately giving rise to radical and revolutionary movements that fundamentally challenged the legitimacy of museums and the art institution itself.

Yet the dialectical process did not end in mere negation. Instead, it led to the development of immanent critique—forms of constructive institutional intervention that acknowledge the museum's embedded position within structures of power while simultaneously activating its transformative capacities. Through self-critique, reconfiguration of collections, repetition as a curatorial strategy, re-reading of colonial and geopolitical histories, and engagement with the public sphere, museums can resist full submission to the logic of capital and instead operate as sites of critical cultural production.

Thus, the future of artistic freedom lies not in abolishing institutions but in transforming them from within. Museums, when aware of their ideological positioning and structural conditions, can mobilize their resources in support of committed and autonomous art. The preservation of art's critical and emancipatory potential therefore, depends on a reflexive, self-aware institutional practice capable of negotiating power without surrendering to it.