Double Institutional Articulation

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Abstract

Contemporary forms for criticality may by traditional standards be paradoxical, showing for instance alignment with capital at the same time as criticising the constituents of neo-liberal hegemonies. In regard of emancipatory techniques that foster “release rather than opposition” (Easterling 2013), and non-aggressive “instituent practices” of art (Raunig 2009), institutional transgression is here discussed in terms of different modes of what could be called double institutional articulation.

Through a rendering of works by Meirle Laderman Ukeles, Michael Asher, Anna Odell, Center for Urban Pedagogy, and Beate Hølmeback, institutional transgression of this double nature is here exemplified and discussed. Discernable modes of institutional articulation appear, such as as acts that conjoin different types of institutions; acts that make spatial and administrative alterations to existing design of institutions; acts that initially operate unannounced in one institutional context, with a postponed effect in other contexts; acts that contrast hermetic institutional decision-making with public involvement; and acts that temporarily disregard normal institutional existence.

Keywords: Institution, critique, art, space.

Criticality

The criticality of artistic acts is usually measured in terms of the current values, rules or expressions that constitute the tradition with which the act is associated. The eventual effect of a transgressive act – its altering capacity – may come later, or remain obscure, or even be completely hidden from the eyes of non-experts. However, sometimes a transgressive act is judged more in terms of its direct societal impact, as a possible leak in, threat to, or actual change of normal circumstances. At times, explicitly stated shifts of interest appear with transgressive intent, such as when Relational Aesthetics was declared in the 1990s as a contemporary movement of institutional reconsideration by its lead theorist Nicolas Bourriaud, breaking with a traditional order of passive spectatorship in museums and galleries. Relational Aesthetics stood for a more problematized, but also a more physically and socially engaged relation between artist, work and public. The break was also stated in relation to the Situationists’ ranks as a main anti-institutional movement of modern art. Bourriaud (1996) saw their lead figure Guy Debord as trapped in a negative Marxist understanding of ‘exchange’, associated with the economic value of trading labour in a market economy, and implied instead that in current times of blurred economies and ownerships, ‘exchange’ could in a subversive account be understood more in terms of human encounter. Even if this emphasis on ‘exchange’ and ‘relational’ was meant as a counter-force against the hierarchical standards of subjectivity-making (including passive onlookers to well-framed geniuses’ artworks), it was also criticised for repeating the usual kind of role patterns and for masking societal conflicts in sensuous encounters with an art-specific content. Since its appearance, Relational Aesthetics has been regularly debated and criticised, probably in large part because the concept was originally tied to certain artists in a certain period in time, ignoring other, or
earlier, relationist works. The term itself also became disputed because it came to represent – in a less scrupulous account, beyond Bourriaud’s control and intentions – a more common institutionalised ambition with programs for ‘social art’ taking place outside the walls of galleries and museums. In his critique of relational art, Jacques Rancière (2009) pointed out that even if radical change was proclaimed, a self-defining discourse in fact restated its own communicational consensus. Judging in retrospect, there is some obvious truth in Rancière’s view that Relational Aesthetics instantly became an institution in its own right, but one must also understand Rancière’s claim here as emanating from his own particular demand for politics in aesthetics. He defended the classical ‘inactive’ viewer’s position, to a certain extent, as long as the work produced the effect of ‘dissensus’, giving the viewer at least two perspectives of one and the same circumstance (Rancière 2010). The art theorist and historian Claire Bishop (2004) pointed to other examples of what she viewed as more radical artistic intervention, or as it were, more ‘participatory’ activation of the social realm than those artists represented by Bourriaud. For Bishop, ‘participatory’ means not ‘a relational aesthetics, [but] a politicised working process’ (Bishop 2012). This declaration could, taken in isolation, be the theme of this text as well. However, in what follows I will be less concerned with the records of participatory projects in the perspective of a recent history of art, and I will avoid ranking art as more or less successful in its critical effect. This text is instead devoted to principal ways of dealing with the issue of double institutional articulation, or how an artistic action concerns, and potentially influences, not only the art institution but other institutional contexts as well. Hence I will take ‘institution’ to mean any regulated collective framework or instance that has a public function and an established position of some relevance in society. ‘Transgressive’ acts in this respect are those that have the capacity to alter the rules, mechanisms or comprehensions of institutions. This does not preclude that institutions themselves can be transgressive. A double institutional articulation, or action, would then not only concern two (or more) institutional frameworks as its subject matter, but also, consequently, put to the test the artistic identity upon which the transgression itself rests.

**Historiography as a Disciplining Agent**

The controversy concerning ‘relational art’ reflects the complexity of institutions’ perpetual making of spectatorship, including claims of owning the issue of what is to be considered transgressive. The recent diversity of critical art practices (in the last half-century or so) also indicates the difficulty of maintaining any reasonably clear-cut conception of what constitutes practical criticism, or what is generally in art discourse labelled ‘institutional critique’. One reason is also that contemporary art institutions may claim their own role as themselves critical, appearing as increasingly scattered, networked, subversive, or run under umbrellas of radical policy, sometimes by few people and sometimes only temporarily (Möntmann 2009). We may then ask: what really is transgressive in such a complex state of affairs? Gerald Raunig, for one, maintains that institutional critique – after its modern invention in the 1960s and 70s in the United States and Europe – is still a valid concept. He sketches how clear-cut critical or antagonist practices in the early phases of this period evolved into a merging of transgressive and alternative strategies, leading of late to more constructivist and autonomous forms, or what he labels ‘instituent practices’ (Raunig 2007). Raunig is primarily concerned with how artists, and the art world, can work in a politically progressive manner. His position can thus be seen as a stance against the more existential, and in a sense dystopic, opinion raised by for instance Andrea Fraser, which holds that artistic criticism is essentially impossible because the artist’s identity carries the institution inside (Fraser 2005). Raunig aligns his reasoning to some extent with a general tendency in art theory of viewing the recent historical narrative in these matters as categorising the intentions of the 60s and 70s as radical, the 80s and 90s as mixed and introspective, and the current period as more autonomous (Sheik 2006; Bryan-Wilson 2003). This type of historiographical periodization, however, to some extent covering discernible trends and struggles of critical art in Post-Fordist economies, also runs the risk of becoming a disciplining force in itself, grouping and streamlining diverse types of art criticism. Departing instead from the basic idea that
societal contexts are never uniform and stable, but force institutions and artists to reconstitute themselves in several different ways, my intention in the following will be to regard individual acts of institutional critique as showing varying modes of antagonism, varying positions of autonomy, and varying types of institutional support. Hence, in order to allow our modes and even methods of critique to be transferable, they could preferably be seen as comprising elements of historical periods that are too often seen as separate and contrasting.

The Institution as a Spatial Agency
In the latter part of 20th century, social media and discursive artistic and cultural modes of expression started to conquer, and in some instances replace, the physical and multi-sensory aesthetic encounter. Despite a general preference for screen-orientation today, artistic display is still often conceived in spatial terms: belonging inside/outside given frameworks, establishing co-operational sub-agencies or satellites, using physical matter, operating at certain locations in an urban context, etc. On a theoretical level, attempts to capture institutional transgression may therefore benefit from viewing ‘the institutional’ as a spatial entity, without of course diminishing the issue as being a simple matter of the division between inside and outside the walls of the institution. Nor should we return to a mere site/non-site distinction, notwithstanding Robert Smithson’s profound efficiency in stating, and staging, the interdependence between site-specific activity and (geographical, cognitive, scientific and institutional) space of display.

Architectural approaches may be of analytical and methodological help here. In its most radical appearance, architecture could be seen to break with its own tradition’s procedures, though usually it has no intention to do so, nor even struggles to do so. More than fine art, architecture is traditionally a genre inherently ‘relational’ in the sense that the receiver’s physical and social encounter with the resulting product is unavoidable. While ‘instituent practices’ in the art world are seen as recent and radical entrepreneurial types of commitment (Raunig 2007), subversive and autonomous, but sometimes not hesitating to join methodological force with some capitalist principles, architecture is already constituted as a commissioner- and user-oriented practice, and more used to handle such complexes. And even if radical so-called ‘paper architecture’ could be considered similar to art practice in terms of visual conceptualisation of radical ideas, there is still a difference in expectation in that architecture has an implied second step in the project realisation. In her view of architecture as a dissident practice resisting obfuscated and elusive hegemonies, or slippery political situations, Keller Easterling has suggested a repertoire of ‘sneaky’ techniques of less transcendent and less automatically oppositional resistance. These techniques include ‘gossip, rumours, gifts, exaggerated compliance, meaninglessness, misdirection, distraction or entrepreneurialism’ (Easterling 2013). This repertoire suggests that institutional critique and transgression have to acknowledge modes of communication intertwined with those of the institution or hegemony in question. Without here diving into the specificity of these ‘dissident’ modes, taking them instead as exemplifying a heterogeneity of subjectivities that both contrasts and aligns with Raunig’s notion of ‘instituent practices’, I will next discuss a range of parainstitutional artistic work. This work spans from smoothly negotiated projects to intra-institutional controversy and to more direct confrontation. The artists discussed vary greatly in experience and level of career, reflecting different types of artistic and human persistence, but also thereby contributing to the complexity of the issue of transgression.

Conjoining Two Institutions
In 1983 the American artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles turned a garbage truck into a shining vehicle running on the streets of New York City. This act, reflecting not only the life and looks of the city in a literal sense, but also attitudes towards the handling of waste, was one in a range of works by Ukeles that directly addressed the conventions and labour of maintenance at both societal and domestic levels.
Another work in this series was Touch Sanitation (1978-80), in which the artist commissioned herself to shake hands with 8500 New York sanitation workers. It took her eleven months to accomplish. Ukeles has only recently been recognised in a broader international context for her consistent work on maintenance issues. For decades she was most known for her early work Hartford Wash (1973), executed at Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, where she spent the days of the exhibition period cleaning the floors and entrance stairs of the museum building. In this work, important for the early feminist American art movement, she addressed in a public act the notion of maintenance as tied to specific social groups or categories. This performance was accompanied by a written manifesto about her role as a woman and mother, the first version of which appeared in 1969. Ukeles thus became a relational artist in a period when most conceptual art was dominated by a more introspective reflection or archival aesthetic. Her works directly involved people that otherwise had nothing to do with the art world, and rules and issues belonging to institutions outside the art world.

Ukeles’s works with sanitation issues led to her being co-opted as a member of New York City’s Sanitation Department, as an unsalaried artist-in-residence, starting in 1977. The relationship grew into a long-term affiliation as part of the remaking of the vast Fresh Kills landfill on Staten Island.

As artist in residence, Ukeles’s intention was to work artistically with the material of non-art institutions and corporations. Ukeles thus opened some ways of merging art activity with corporate activity, while often maintaining a clearly mediated distinction between art work and other work, such as when mimicking the movement of sanitation workers or staging a play with caterpillars, in order to symbolically recognize the lesser known and under-appreciated qualities of labour. Ukeles’s works are an example of freedom lying ‘less in the solipsistic ideal of doing whatever one wants, and more in the accomplishment of “bringing into relationship”’ (Gablik 1991).

On the whole, Ukeles’s work is an example of undertaking a critical project in relation to two different social domains and institutions: art and maintenance. Her work is done in collegiality with both, and thus is transgressive not in the sense breaking the rules or causing a dispute, but as a patient occupation with the disciplinary frames of those institutions. Thus she works with the institutions rather than against them in order to achieve a change of the way they are viewed. Alteration of perspective, does, as we shall see, not even require a positioning on the outside, but may be achieved in works that remain completely within the context of the institution physically but that use the institutional architecture itself as working material, as will be shown in the next case.
Institutional Framing as a Working Material

The American artist Michael Asher transformed in 2008 the Santa Monica Museum of Art by filling the interior space with a series of bare metal stud walls. The floor-to-ceiling studs partitioned the rooms in seemingly random ways, but showed at the same time a certain repetitive pattern. This metal framing pattern showed the positions (forty-four in all) of the temporary walls that had been built for all the various exhibitions the museum had held over the years. It revealed a preference for certain wall locations, but also deviations indicating specific artistic demands. As a poetics of institutional space – poetics being a genre-specific reflection of its own tradition – the piece was accomplished literally through the vanished material used by that tradition. This minimal work could thus be seen as a material merging of ‘history’ and ‘institution’. Even if the meaning of the work has an evident conceptual side – in the sense that the fact that we know how it was done is enough to grasp the idea – the full and immediate articulation of this materialised institutional history also includes an experiencing embodied presence (Rondeau 2008).

Asher often works, as in Santa Monica, together with the governmental organisation and the physical context of the institution, sometimes including its public relations staff. ‘Asher’s methodology is precise: his work is always crafted from the existing contingencies that make its presentation possible’ (Rondeau 2008). He is, in other words, making context into theme, context here comprising the immediate material circumstances as well as the commonly assumed policies for art display, communication, and, not least, ownership. Who has the right to (the display of) a work of art?

The particular issue of ownership was given another consideration by Asher in a work conducted at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1999, a work that generated wider public interest in the mass media, and a general debate of civic rights in relation to museums. He was invited to participate in a group exhibition called The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect and he accepted the request as a great challenge to reveal and articulate the ideological difference between these two aspects in a work that addressed the most fundamental function of a museum, namely the practice of collecting. Asher took interest in the ‘secret’ de-accessions recursively made by the museum. He managed, with hesitating assistance from the museum, to produce a list of de-accessions, a list that became his contribution to the exhibition. However, the chief curator of the museum wanted to make a written statement accompanying Asher’s list, saying that it was ‘unofficial’ and did not ‘meet the criteria of completeness or accuracy that we would require in a museum publication’ (Pasher 1999). The work caused institutional fear of losing trust. After the opening, in an attempt to reassure potential donors, another museum director felt he had to write a letter to the editor in the New York Times (Miller 1999) saying that ‘most American museums acquire far more than they remove.’ The artist Allan
Sekula commented on this statement, meant to reinstall institutional integrity, by pointing to its ‘Borgesian character of [implying the existence of] a Museum that removes more works than it acquires’ (Sekula 1999).

The public critique of the museum’s de-accession policy made by journalists, critics, and public figures, along with the museum’s response, reflect the political train of relations between society and artistic space. In a reflection on the societal implications, Asher commented on the public protests against MoMA’s politics, saying that the collections in museums must be seen as part of ‘a consciousness of the community’ (Pasher 1999). The exposure of this way of dealing with public property without informing the citizens – the essential owners – raised the general awareness of collective ownership.

It has been suggested that Asher’s preoccupation with the fundamental matters of institutions in several works of art are ‘supportive’ (Pålto 2010) or ‘encouraging’ (James Rondeau 2008) to the institution. For instance, he might improve the spatial conditions for other artists or the quality of the promotion of an exhibition. Asher’s works often evoke negotiation troubles or outright conflict with an institution, but the acts themselves are not confrontational in a societal or legal sense; they are meticulously performed to question the social constructions of customary institutional behaviour. Asher’s intra-institutional way of working, engaging a multiplicity of institutional actors, may as indirect effects bring about changes in society.

As a general reflection, we may conclude that the head of an institution, as its official representative in society, has the ability to define the border between what in the institution is public and what is not. But moving that border implies political action. This is part of what we may call the institutional production of societal space. Maybe we must acknowledge two kinds of ‘public’ domain here, as far as institutions that are wholly or in part funded by taxpayers are concerned: one mediated space (to the public) and one administered space (for the public). In order to also render a more direct addressing of societal institutions outside the art world, we will look into a type of intervention that, in contrast to both Ukeles’s and Asher’s firmly negotiated approaches, works more by an unannounced provocation of social rules and etiquette.

**Institutional Intervention and the Exposure of Tacit and Legalised Rules**

While still a student at Konstfack, the University College of Arts, Crafts and Design in Stockholm, the Swedish artist Anna Odell meticulously prepared an event in which she would appear to be about to jump from a bridge, more precisely the Liljeholm Bridge, known locally for suicide attempts. On the evening of 21 January 2009 Odell appeared on the bridge acting suspiciously desperate. Passers by noted her actions and somebody called the police. They picked her up by force and admitted her into protective medical custody in the psychological emergency ward at St Görans Hospital. When she eventually revealed that her act had been a part of an art project, the hospital staff was enraged and the head of department reported her to the police, and it became news matter. When people found out, she was quickly denounced in the mass media by journalists, medical professionals, and even people in the art world, but above all by the general public for having done nothing more than waste hospital resources and show contempt for the rescue service personnel.

This action became one of the most mass-mediated art projects ever in Sweden. The initial phase of that debate focused however almost solely on the rights and restrictions of art, and on ethical and legal judgements of what were considered ‘fake’ or ‘destructive’ actions.
A couple of months after the bridge action, Odell followed with a video-based installation in a traditional art context (as part of the annual students’ exhibition). She showed a symbolic bed with restraining belts alongside documentation of the act itself (film and photos shot from a distance by friends), and a filmed documentary of Odell’s preparatory process including consultations with lawyers and psychiatrists.

The bridge action led to legal action, and Odell was convicted of violent resistance and fraudulent practice. She and her solicitor objected to the verdict of fraudulent practice, but she also declared herself reasonably comfortable with the outcome and with the support given her by her supervisors at the school.

One year later, speaking on a popular talk radio program, Odell gave a detailed, explanatory, and self-confessional account of the whole process (Odell 2010), including polemic comments towards people in power positions. Other public events followed: talks, interviews, panels, and lectures at schools and institutions.

Odell showed in this work, Unknown, Woman 2009-349701, an order of transgression opposite to pre-announced and institutionally supported art projects. Operating unannounced, provoking tacit rules in society, and only thereafter revisiting the art institution as well as the hospital institution in the communications that followed, Odell had to rely initially on the decency of common societal reasoning, something she could not really control herself. However, she had institutional support to a certain extent: apart from being able to say that she acted with an artistic purpose, she was also partly supported by her school’s supervisors.

In the public debate about Odell’s work, a subtle shift occurred in media coverage from being preoccupied with art definitions and the ethics of the artistic act itself to more direct questioning medical care policies. But the polemic tone was also altered. In a series of recurring vignettes about the case in the leading newspaper Dagens Nyheter, the events were first depicted as having caused a ‘scandal’, then a ‘debate’ (Anders Marner, quoted in Söderberg 2009). Thus in relation to the ambivalent but strong public response, Odell’s act may be seen as trans-contextual in several ways: apart from having a direct impact on the debate and regulation regarding psychiatric care, and in particular the use of restraints and the reporting procedures (Björling 2009), it also influenced the debate and the protocol regarding the role of authorization and ethics in art education. And not least, as the change in the debate showed, it managed to evoke questions about investigating and journalistic ethics.
Architectural Practice transgressing Institutional Space

The works discussed here reflect the transgression of rules in art institutions as well as in other contexts, such as sanitation, civic ownership, and medical care. All of them appeared, in one phase or another, within the physical framing of institutions, whether that framing was treated as an unproblematic spatial resource for display or as the material thematically addressed in the work. This dichotomy reflects the general architectural problem of redefining institutional habits through the medium of spatial design. Architecture that moreover takes on a double critical approach – to the traditional process of accomplishing a building as well as to the societal institution it hosts – faces in principle many of the same problems as the artists mentioned above. One may in this respect recall the seminal examples of Matrix Feminist Design Cooperative in the 1980s, with their day-care architecture for multi-ethnic neighbourhoods. Their unorthodox design approach allowed both the institution and the parents to participate in the design process (in drawing, 3D modelling and construction). This led to a thinking that allowed sequential movements through the interior division of space, a mix of working groups, and group care for children of different ages instead of a static separation and a more dictatorial spatial canalisation of activities and users (Dwyer and Thorne, 2007).

Needless to say, this type of partial integration, reflected and realised in Matrix’s projects, has in recent decades revolutionized day care and nurseries in many Western countries, and thus also changed the way children are integrated into adults’ cultures and worldviews.

Matrix’s transgressive and self-defining architectural agency exemplifies a kind of productive disregard for institutionalised procedures. So do also some of the instituent practices and autonomous agents that not only reinvent the habits of a practice but also the professional identification with it. One example is CUP (Center for Urban Pedagogy), whose engaged consultation in visual communication, writing and law is at the centre of their aspiration to improve civic engagement and demystify urban policy and planning issues (CUP, 2014). These ways of incorporating public engagement into the planning process could be compared with another recent example of an unorthodox client relationship, namely the Norwegian architect Beate Hølmebakk’s transgressive handling of prison spaces, which also transgresses traditional building design procedures. In order to trigger solutions for spatial improvement of prisons, her office, Manthey Kula, sent letters to the leaders of forty-two existing state prisons in Norway (Payne, 2010) to gather information about their spatial qualities (or lack thereof). Hølmebakk used these letters as sources of inspiration for design proposals, supporting her office’s on-going work with institutional spatial hierarchies and regulation. It led, for example, to altered conceptions about what kind of views of the outside should be offered to prisoners and staff. It also generated an unorthodox architectural response to what kind of messages the fencing – i.e. material raised primarily to keep groups of people apart – conveys to those on the inside and to those on the outside as well.

Fig. 4. Beate Holmebakk/Manthey Kula, Outdoor Area Juvenile Unit Bergen Prison, 2010
A common feature in the work of Hølmebakk, CUP and Matrix, apart from their interest in the physical aspects of common institutional space, is their unorthodox way of handling not only the subject matter of institutions, but the practical procedures of invitation and decision-making. They avoid the modes of internal professional institutionalism others take for granted. This also aligns them, though they belong to different communities of practice, with Asher, Ukeles, APG and Odell. A degree of autonomy in relation to their own tradition is a common transgressive feature, though they handle it very differently.

**Conclusion: Institutional Critique as Double Articulation**

In this reflection on artistic institutional critique we have been able to discern at least five principal forms of what has here been labelled double institutional articulation: 1) acts that conjoin different types of institutions, thus activating otherwise separate types of societal agency; 2) acts that make spatial alterations to existing design of institutions, hence influencing institutional administration as a general issue; 3) acts that initially operate unannounced in one institutional context, and later have a postponed effect in other contexts; 4) acts that contrast hermetic institutional decision-making with public participation; and 5) acts that temporarily disregard normal institutional existence in autonomous practice. These modes of transgression illuminate not only the institutional regulatory framework and its material features, but also the societal task that the institution has: of hosting, representing and ordering human subjectivity. In this respect they serve, by making visible and tangible, a general right to alter our societal conditions. They may also be seen as informing a research strategy discussion where these types of precarious positioning, point in a direction where the researcher bring into play her own fundament while interrogating institutional constituents.

**References**


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