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Press Releases

## Here, bad news always arrives too late

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### Institutional Critique in Canada (1967–2012): A Chronology

*"In 1967, London, Ontario, artist Jack Chambers received a letter from the National Gallery of Canada informing him that the institution was preparing to assemble a collection of slides of Canadian art. They asked for permission to reproduce a photograph of one of his works while informing him that if he didn't react immediately, the duplication of the slide would be carried out without his permission. Chambers refused to collaborate with the gallery and sent a copy of the letter detailing his refusal to one hundred and thirty fellow Canadian artists. Following this dispute, he founded the Canadian Artists' Representation (CARFAC), whose goal was the establishment of fair policies for artists in regards to intellectual property.<sup>1</sup>*

*Also in 1969, N.E. Thing Co. (Iain and Ingrid Baxter), for their exhibition *Building Structure*, took over the Carmen Lamanna Gallery in Toronto, integrating a structure of beams into the walls, floor, and ceiling. This new configuration disrupted the limit between the gallery space and the "fictional" environment created by N.E. Thing Co. to serve as its field of operations, and between June and July of this same year, N.E. Thing Co. set up a second head office on the ground floor of the National Gallery of Canada (with the support of director Pierre Théberge), effectively making visible to the public the administrative workings of the institution. During the June 9 conference organized by the Baxters to discuss the issues raised by their interventions, the critic Lucy R. Lippard and dealer Seth Siegelau used the opportunity to open a debate on the Art Workers' Coalition's recent public hearings (both of them were then active members of the collective).<sup>3</sup>*

*In the same year, Carol Condé and Karl Beveridge established themselves in New York and served as CARFAC representatives for Canadian artists living there. During this period, their artistic practice gradually moved away from formalist to more overtly political concerns. Following this change of direction, they took part in activities organized by the Artists Meeting for Cultural Change collective, as well as the Ad Hoc Women Artists Committee (which met monthly at the Paula Cooper Gallery). These collectives protested against the stranglehold that the Rockefeller family held over the programming and acquisitions policies of the Whitney Museum while at the same time supporting other causes not directly linked to the art world. Condé and Beveridge's militancy shifted drastically when they became members*

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of the American section of *Art and Language* and of the editorial board of the *Fox* magazine in the mid 1970s. However, the heated debates between the different ideological factions within the group led to irreconcilable antagonisms that precipitated its breakup and the end of the periodical's publication. The couple's return to Toronto in 1976 coincided with the departure of *Art and Language*'s Australian members (Ian Burns and Mel Ramsden), who also dropped out of the art world to devote themselves to trade union activism on a full-time basis.<sup>4</sup>

Some years earlier, the Art Gallery of Ontario curator Ronald Nasgaard had offered Condé and Beveridge a retrospective exhibition of their works (the agreement had initially consisted of presenting the individual work of the two artists together). During Nasgaard's visits to New York, however, the couple gradually introduced him to the significant changes taking place in their collaborative practice. Held in 1976, the exhibition was presented as an assessment of the paradoxical situation created when the byproducts of political activism targeting institutions are presented in an officially sanctioned space such as the museum.<sup>5</sup> In the catalogue, an intrinsic element of the project, Condé and Beveridge chronicled their everyday lives in New York, highlighting the divide between the revolutionary pretensions of the individuals associated with the *Fox*, and the decidedly middle-class lives they led, thanks to the Canada Council. Entitled *Is this Still Privileged Art?*, the publication took the form of a comic book, with drawings in a style inspired by Maoist realism.

In 1981, Brian MacNevin organized the exhibition *Vocation/Vacation* at the Walter Phillips Gallery in Banff, bringing together works by Michael Asher, Hans Haacke, Gary Neil Kennedy, and Jan Pottie and Tom Sherman.<sup>6</sup> For the exhibition, MacNevin asked the artists to venture outside the institutional purview of the gallery and out of the Banff Centre into the town itself, which resulted in artists' projects that mostly addressed the hierarchies existing between disciplines within residency programs at the centre.<sup>6</sup>

In 1983, Hans Haacke's artwork *Voici Alcan* was presented at the *Galerie France Morin* in Montreal. It was composed of three photographic panels in aluminum frames, a typical product of the Quebec-based Alcan corporation. Two of the panels showed appropriated advertisements for the *Opéra de Montréal*, for which Alcan was the main sponsor. The third panel displayed an image of the body of South African anti-apartheid activist Stephen Biko, who had died in the late 1970s after being beaten by police during an interrogation in Pretoria, South Africa. A citation from Bertolt Brecht was engraved around the inside of the panels: "Less than ever does a simple reproduction of reality tell us anything about reality. A photograph of the Krupp works on AEG yields almost nothing about these institutions. Reality proper has slipped into the functional. The reification of human relationships, the factory, let's say, no longer reveals these relationships. Therefore something has actually to be constructed, something artificial, something set up."<sup>7</sup> When the relocated National Gallery acquired and exhibited the piece in 1988, Alcan accused the institution of spreading misinformation about its activities in South Africa and of sullyng the company's reputation. The Canadian media generally supported Alcan's side of the debate in their coverage, which ended up getting a considerable amount of press. The employees of the National Gallery, however, defended the integrity of Haacke's piece, and argued for the relevance of the institution's acquisition...

The chronology that I have begun to write here could find many uses, according to the thematic rubrics that one might classify it under. One possibility would be to boil it down to a chronicle, albeit an incomplete one, on the fleeting points of contact between the New York art world and its counterparts north of the border. However, my goal was to gather together a few anecdotes that might shed some light on the scattered and somewhat forgotten manifestations of institutional critique in Canada, with the goal of weaving this relatively little-known web of narratives in with the more familiar histories of Canadian artist-run centres. One of the methodological shortcomings of my project became evident

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when I realized that there was no clear consensus among art historians as to the theoretical objects and artworks that might fit in between the adjective “institutional” and the noun “critique.” In their efforts to compress and simplify a complex history, historians have privileged a limited configuration of protagonists and events at the expense of omitting peripheral cases more difficult to grasp. Another reason for the failure of this undertaking is doubtlessly the restrictions entailed by the heading “national,” a rubric under which I also had hoped to be able to group together this sequence of otherwise markedly disparate events.

I. “By 1985, I had had the opportunity to read Benjamin Buchloh’s earlier essays on Marcel Broodthaers and Michael Asher as well as Asher’s *Writings 1973–1983 on Works 1969–1979*, edited by Buchloh. I read Daniel Buren’s ‘The Function of the Museum’ from 1970, ‘The Function of the Studio’ from 1971, and Haacke’s ‘All the Art That’s Fit to Show’ from 1974, when they appeared in *Museums by Artists* in 1983. (Haacke’s retrospective at the New Museum didn’t take place until 1986.)”<sup>8</sup>

Here, Andrea Fraser suggests a genealogy of the term “institutional critique,” which for her is now devoid of the political valency it might once have had. She claims to have coined it while trying to identify precursors to Louise Lawler’s work, during the writing of one of her first articles for *Art in America* in the mid 1980s.<sup>9</sup> This quote seemed almost to offer itself as a key to unlocking the definition of overlooked cultural transfers and methodological shortcomings that drove me to write this essay. In disclosing a fragment of her intellectual trajectory, Fraser conveys a paradox apparent *only* to Canadian readers of this article. She mentions two documents—a monograph (Michael Asher, *Writings 1973–1983 on Works 1969–1979*, 1983) and an anthology (*Museums by Artists*, 1983)—through which she was able to familiarize herself with a number of art practices that would then influence her mature work.<sup>10</sup> In Canada, these books did not bring about the kind of debates that would later inspire artistic communities in the US and Europe. However, they had, in a sense, precociously put into motion the canonization of institutional critique.

*Museums by Artists*, under the direction of Peggy Gale and AA Bronson, underplayed somewhat the budding institutional critique canon, as it includes several contributions from Canadian artists (e.g., N.E. Thing Co., Garry Neil Kennedy, Vera Frenkel, and Glenn Lewis) whose approaches were comparable to their European and American counterparts. This attempt of pairing projects on a thematic level nevertheless disregards the real exchanges that might have occurred between these artists. Consulting this book twenty-eight years after its publication, one wonders, for instance, to what extent the multifaceted oeuvre of Broodthaers influenced the work of General Idea, Image Bank, or Glenn Lewis.

In the book’s introduction, Gale outlines, perhaps unconsciously, the limitations of her and Bronson’s project. Taking a cue from Harald Szeemann, she attempts to deterritorialize the concept of the museum so that it can be semantically expanded, and then appropriated by artists: “The *structure* of the museum here should be understood metaphorically as both edifice and role model, where irony almost always plays a central part.”<sup>11</sup> In the end, the typology she uses to break down and differentiate the contributions overly focuses on Szeemann’s category of personal mythology. She also precociously formulates a truism about institutional critique’s Achilles heel; for her, artists that invest themselves in the protocols of a given institution by responding to the contingencies of a particular context often get entangled in an undertaking driven by ambiguity: “The position *contra* museums is always ambiguous, for the museum itself seems to welcome comment, even confrontation, inside its walls in the comfortable—if unstated—assumption that by so doing it defuses and co-opts. And to a considerable extent it is so.”<sup>12</sup> The lack of nuance in her statement is somewhat surprising, appearing as it does next to texts like those of Haacke and Buren, which chronicle in minute detail the real antagonisms at play between artists and institutions. Encompassing a wide scope of practices, from the subtle architectural interventions of

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Asher to Robert Filliou's *Galerie Légitime* (founded in 1962), *Museums by Artists* blurs the specificity of a context that allowed certain projects to come into being. Instead, the book itself becomes a metaphor for the museum, thematically stitching together incidental statements in an attempt to produce a coherent whole, only to create more fragmentation in the long run.

Since the 1970s, Benjamin Buchloh and Anne Rorimer have carried on a continuous discussion with Michael Asher and John Knight, mediating into writing some of their relatively obscure "interventions." Archived (or in some instances never even leaving the realm of discussion) projects were "resurrected" by way of this art historical exegesis. More recently, Kirsi Peltomäki's doctoral thesis on Asher, *Situation Aesthetics* (2010), seems to follow this trend. Given privileged access to the artist's archives, Peltomäki was able to minutely detail the genesis of Asher's projects, whether they were produced or not.<sup>14</sup> In this scenario, with the accrual of secondary information, the discursive specificity of these projects is undermined, and they eventually become a mere appendage to the name of the artist, or simply a signature style. A monographic subject thus seems to haunt scholarship on institutional critique; it has its roots at the core of a hermeneutical apparatus that artists like Asher or Knight attempted to put into question through a particular investment in the context of the presentation and dissemination of their works. With a few exceptions aside, the historical objectification of such practices has not been previously examined.

A canon is constructed and gains legitimacy through the concealment of decisions made in a more or less arbitrary manner that unwittingly reflect the ideological position and politics of those that make them. Of course, this can be said of the entire field of contemporary art. The theoretical montage that fashioned institutional critique seems nevertheless to inhabit a particular discursive area where historians and artists collaborate on building exegesis to the point where interpretative texts and artworks end up forming one seamless whole.

In the wake of *Museums by Artists*, certain authors began to broaden the scope of the term "institutional critique." Julia Bryan-Wilson, for example, adopts this approach in her article entitled "A Curriculum for Institutional Critique, or the Professionalization of Conceptual Art,"<sup>15</sup> which emphasizes the heterogeneity of artists' gestures rather than their commonality. She recognizes, nevertheless, the risks incurred by generalizing the usage of the term without taking into consideration that it never properly took hold in certain parts of the world. However, the objective of her text is not so dissimilar: to tackle the seemingly impossible project of adapting a complex body of knowledge to the narrow frame of a pedagogical curriculum. Since the publication of Bryan-Wilson's article in 2003, several authors have taken up the task of reappraising institutional critique. *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writing*, edited by Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, is the latest instantiation of this enterprise, essentially instigated in the early 2000s by American and German scholars.<sup>16</sup> Following the example of their first collective effort, a critical anthology on conceptualism, Alberro and Stimson bring together both familiar and lesser-known texts with the goal of widening the historical scope of the debates that had initially taken place among a restricted group of interlocutors. However, this all-encompassing and inclusive approach gives the project a false sheen of comprehensiveness. The further one gets into the book, the more one realizes that the authors (artists, in this case) arrive at the conclusion that the co-optation of artistic subversion reached its peak during the latter half of the 1990s. Yet, their points of view differ when it comes to defining the nature of this impasse and ways of getting out of it (only when this possibility is envisioned, it must be said).

In the introductory texts to *Institutional Critique and After*, Alberro and Stimson link the first wave of institutional critique with a modernist project of preserving the agonistic public sphere.<sup>17</sup> Alberro writes: "The artistic practices that in the late 1960s and 1970s came to be referred to as institutional critique revised that radical promise of the European Enlightenment, and they did so precisely by confronting the

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institution of art with the claim that it was not sufficiently committed, let alone realizing or fulfilling the pursuit of publicness that had brought it into being at the first place. ... That gesture of negation, of negating the established conventions of art, was modernist at its core. It posited that the aesthetic exists in the critical exchange, in the debate, within the context of the art world.”<sup>18</sup> For both Alberro and Stimson the ideal of the museum as an open forum had been corrupted by the expansion of the culture industry. Artists were attempting to reclaim their voices by uncovering the hermeneutic contradictions in the discourse of a ruling elite—more often than not the members of a board of directors enmeshed in the military-industrial complex. Buren, Haacke, and Asher thus used strategies of counter-publicity to disrupt aesthetic experience and uncover the mechanisms whereby the museum naturalizes and reproduces bourgeois subjectivity.<sup>19</sup> In this volume, Stimson also posits that the desire to instigate a debate within the limited purview of the museum distinguishes this movement from the critical trends emerging from the aftermath of the May '68 uprisings, which rejected institutions en bloc: “Institutional critique preserved the institution of art in the context of 1968’s broad disavowal of institutionality by holding it accountable to its founding ideals—that is, more or less, can serve as a summary of my argument so far.”<sup>20</sup> He then cites Cornelius Castoriadis proposing that abstract configurations such as political parties or corporations are granted relative autonomy and can impose their presence in the social realm as monolithic and sovereign entities. As tools of repressive authority, Louis Althusser’s ideological state apparatuses work according to the same protocol of abstraction, “calling up” subjects who are instructed to identify themselves and obey.

Since the mid 1990s, many theorists and artists have made similar observations on the limitations of the model of reflexivity used by a first generation of practitioners that targeted the complex of institutions then known as the culture industry. Throughout the 1970s, denunciation of modes of domination usually passed through the lens of Marxist theory. Today, in the absence of models that allow for a “horizon of possibility,” emancipation seems out of reach, at least at a collective level. As Ève Chiapello and Luc Boltanski posit in an oft-cited chapter of *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (1999, 2006 for the English translation), corporations from the tertiary sector have assimilated a large swath of the post-May '68 “artist’s critique,” with the aim of upgrading their human resource management techniques.<sup>21</sup> However, these observations are often the result of an oversimplification of the theses put forward by the two authors, particularly Boltanski, who defines himself as a politically committed intellectual and places the idea of emancipation at the core of his work. In a recently published book, he advocates a pragmatic approach that re-establishes actors’ reflexivity in situations that would normally constrain them.<sup>22</sup> Boltanski defines the institution as a bodiless being, equipped with spokespersons whose role is to produce semantic consistency, and by the same token, exert repression. When hermeneutic contradictions arise within this relational modality, it becomes clear that the sovereignty of the institution cannot cover all of the real. The gap between official and officious discourse, for example, opens up a critical space without which “individuals would be immersed in a world taken for granted, without being able to distance themselves from these forms, in order to question them.”<sup>23</sup>

In hopes of regaining some of this critical agency, Andrea Fraser describes the institution as being an inextricable component of her subjectivity: “Every time we speak of the ‘institution’ as other than ‘us,’ we disavow our role in the creation and perpetuation of its condition. We avoid responsibility for, or actions against, the everyday complicities, compromises and censorship—above all self-censorship—which are driven by our own interests in the field and the benefits we derive from it.”<sup>24</sup> From one project to the next, Fraser always adds an additional layer of complexity to the analysis of her personal entanglement in the field of art. However, without the proper interpretative framework, her most recent projects would remain relatively unreadable. Accompanying texts are thus an innate part of Fraser’s interventions, and it is through these texts that she is able to consolidate the historical progression between the first and second waves of institutional critique.<sup>25</sup>

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Some commentators note that the recuperation of artists' strategies by European institutions has been largely advantageous to a certain part of the cultural sector in the 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>29</sup> The artists were then no longer the sole agents of reflexivity, since they shared authorship of their projects with curators.<sup>30</sup> This trend of "New Institutionalism" thus momentarily eliminated the antagonisms that characterized the first and second waves of institutional critique in favour of flexible, discursive platforms, ostensibly making up for the dearth of public space. This time around, all of the producers involved shaped the "subjectivity" of the institution. However, a few years after having edited an anthology mapping out this phenomenon, Nina Möntmann notes that most of the museums and *kunstvereins* that had initiated these projects at the end of the 1990s had to go through a reality check during the following decade:

The Rooseum is becoming a branch of the expanding Moderna Museet in Stockholm; the Museum of Contemporary Art in Oslo has been merged with other national museums in Oslo under the umbrella of the National Museum for Contemporary Art, Architecture and Design; Vilnius is suffering from severe budget cuts; in several places curators and directors have been replaced, which has a huge impact on the programmatic approach of the institutions, and in the case of NIFCA itself the institution has even been closed down. Most of the institutions seem to have been put in their place like insubordinate teenagers.<sup>31</sup>

Möntmann's article was published in a thematic feature entitled "Progressive Institutions" on the Web site of the European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies (EIPCP), which has become a rallying point for a group of intellectuals from several disciplinary fields whose shared goal is the transnational struggle against neoliberal hegemony.<sup>32</sup> As an outcome of this project, Gerald Raunig proposes leaving behind the sociological reflexivity of the first and second waves of institutional critique in favour of "instituent practices" that might be able to have an effect beyond the restricted purview of the art field.<sup>33</sup> Pairing Foucauldian theory with Paolo Virno's concept of "multitude," he posits that certain activists could find a way out of the second wave's trapping into a Bourdieusian circuitous rhetoric.<sup>34</sup> Stimson and Alberro come to a similar conclusion suggesting that it might be time to hand over the reins to practitioners of "tactical media" as an "exit strategy" (e.g., Bureau d'études, @tmark, RepoHistory, the Yes Men, SubRosa, Raqs Media Collective, the Electronic Disturbance Theater in the United States, and WochenKlausur in Austria). According to them, these artists have "little patience" for critical undertakings that remain cloistered in the field of art. Still, in broadening the scope of what constitutes institutional critique to include the gestures of those driven by a desire to diversify their "targets," the authors overextend once more the reach of the "label." The mass rejection of "internal critique" inspired by reflexive sociology of Boltanski and Bourdieu gives rise to yet another methodological shortcut. The political agency of these protagonists invariably becomes reinscribed into the tangled web of the art world's mechanisms of legitimization. Andrea Fraser adds that the impossibility of escaping from the art field does not preclude action (and thus political commitment), but is nevertheless the product of a situation where she still needs to identify herself with the "artist." The scope of this professional category is then limited by the necessity of defining artworks as service provision, for better or for worse.<sup>35</sup>

II. In going through these reexaminations, I have tried in vain to find allusions to the paradigm of self-management in the art field, one that was born from the same intellectual breeding ground as institutional critique, and prefigures these purportedly "instituent" practices. Unlike the texts that I have already analyzed, where a back-and-forth debate between the same protagonists crystallizes into a seamless theoretical body, the content of publications on the historiography of artist-run centres remains very uneven. Nevertheless, the project of reappraising these two discrete discursive formations all came to a similar conclusion: their trajectory is characterized by two waves, and both arrived at the same stalemate around the end of the 1990s. I will now mostly focus on Canadian examples without

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relinquishing a comparative methodology.

During the first of these waves (1968–76), artist collectives and parallel spaces organized themselves into an informal network, forming a counter-public of peers. Over the course of this same period, many Canadian artist collectives such as General Idea and Image Bank concurrently created fictional institutions and managed legitimately incorporated artist-run centres such as Art Metropole (Toronto) and the Western Front Society (Vancouver), all while maintaining emphasis on the porosity between art and administration. AA Bronson's autobiographical contribution to *Museums by Artists*, "The Humiliation of the Bureaucrat: Artist-Run Centres as Museums by Artists," details the difficult cohabitation of an artistic practice with the management of an institution. The text is peppered with performative statements (both felicitous and otherwise) that call attention to the distressed imaginary at the root of self-determination: "The artist inhabits this flux of dream-galleries, traveling through these private chambers in which s/he enacts the whole chain of artworld beings as a sort of psychodrama of one's most archetypal desires/dreams. One wants to be an artist. One is an artist. One wants to be an artist in control of one's environment. One is an artist in control of one's environment. One thinks one is. One thinks one is not. One wants to be one thinking one is in control of one's environment. One is. One is not."<sup>36</sup> Bronson does to a certain extent recount the trajectories of his peers, but the spotlight never strays far from the career path of General Idea. The collective that he co-founded with Felix Partz and Jorge Zontal managed to authenticate its media image during a period when Canadian unity itself depended on a cyberneticized version of McLuhanism. By dint of being told and retold, this narrative eventually became official history. I have discussed elsewhere to what extent the consolidation of self-determination as a discourse in Canada was not solely the product of artists' volition, but rather that of programs put in place by the Trudeau government, programs with their own *modus operandi*.<sup>37</sup> In offering young beneficiaries the possibility of realizing projects that ostensibly satisfied the ideals of emancipation and decentralization of the period, government authorities attempted to eradicate risks of popular uprising. Complex contractual relationships were thus created between artists and the state when cultural producers were granted civic responsibilities. Thanks to the Local Initiatives Program, and later the Canada Council for the Arts, the desire for self-management was fulfilled while most artists bypassed the need to reevaluate existing institutions, like their American counterparts, before creating new ones (with some notable exceptions, as made clear by the fragmentary chronology at the beginning of this essay).

The second wave (1976–88) was largely characterized by the democratization of services offered to groups outside the field of art. Some Canadian centres moved toward becoming forums for debating issues of racism, homophobia, and sexism (e.g., A Space in Toronto during the 1980s); meanwhile in the United States, the "culture wars" were raging and many alternative spaces became targets of the political right.<sup>38</sup> The rest of the story is well known; in order to survive, relatively informal structures were forced to form partnerships with the private sector, and the National Endowment for the Arts demanded that artists become fully professionalized when public funds began to dwindle. The rise of the right was certainly felt in Canada as well, but the deep-rootedness of the artist-run centre network in a system monitored by granting agencies prevented collapse. While functioning according to a model of peer arbitration, this network paradoxically acquired the status of an autonomous infrastructure.<sup>39</sup>

In the introduction to an anthology on *autogestion* (self-management) in France, Frank Georgi highlights the fact that this concept, one that mobilized many leftists in the 1960s, disappeared from the political lexicon over the following decades.<sup>40</sup> His book mostly brings together case studies on these "golden years of self-management," where the utopian idea of bypassing organizational hierarchy went far beyond the rejection of a corporate model, as it fertilized "new social movements that aimed to change everyday life: ecology, the reclaiming of urban space, feminism, regionalism, anti-authoritarian pedagogy, community-based utopianism."<sup>41</sup> In Canada, we still use the concept of self-determination (or in French-speaking Quebec, *autogestion*) as a theoretical basis for defining the democratic ethos of

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artist-run centres, although the word seems to have little remaining performative effect; we repeat it out of habit, otherwise we would have to overhaul an entire set of communication protocols.

The historiography of these centres essentially ends during a certain period (the 1990s) beyond which mapping them out as a coherent whole becomes less and less possible. Endorsing a theory of social movements, Clive Robertson posits that a shared project of establishing policy still brings together artists and cultural producers in their endeavour to preserve this infrastructure.<sup>42</sup> He also notes that artist-run culture mainly attracts groups involved in wider social causes.<sup>43</sup> However, in retrospect, many of them later distanced themselves from the more radical ideas generated during periods of economic prosperity where artists retained agency on most levels of decision-making during board of directors meetings. Forty years after the founding of the first centres, artists are now a very diversified population and more often than not ideologically divided. The anthology *Decentre* (2007) presents a sampling of these often diametrically opposed positions.<sup>44</sup> This project, like many others in a similar vein, confines itself to a collage of scattered points of view that tries to smooth out the antagonisms existing between the protagonists involved. When one attempts to assess the texts as a unified discursive body, the subject at hand loses its contours. With this in mind, I will nevertheless try to sketch out a cursive tableau of this “spectre” of self-determination such as it lingers here in Canada.

Some advocates of “alternative structures” suggest that artists should continue benefiting from a peer-based system of evaluation that has survived many internal crises. This standpoint answers to a shared desire to preserve the institutions of the welfare state and to consolidate already well-established democratic mechanisms in order to prevent market forces and populism from taking over the agonistic public sphere. Artist-run centres have become part of a much larger network of community organizations providing common services and resources since the end of the 1960s. Others still defend artist-run initiatives, and acquiesce to the rules and trends of the culture industry by advocating “flexibility” towards the market economy (according to them, this compromise does not conflict with the ideals of artist-run culture). Within this “faction,” self-managed structures are defined as launching pads for emerging artists and administrators alike. In this framework, there is no differentiation between institutions, as they all serve the same function of helping young cultural producers at a strategic moment in their careers. A perverse rekindling of the self-management paradigm is heavily influenced by neoliberalism where “alternative” grassroots organizations function as links in the chain that consolidates a system based on individual entrepreneurship and meritocracy rather than a spirit of collectivism. Rejecting both models, certain groups of artists attempt to circumvent bureaucratic red tape by setting in motion para-institutional projects mostly developed without recourse to government money.<sup>45</sup> These groups generally follow the now-exhausted model of a gift economy that had allowed collectives from the early 1970s to operate in a relatively autonomous manner. The life expectancy of these projects thus depends largely on the investment and commitment of both the founding members and the counter-publics that form around them. Some groups demonstrate a firmly leftist allegiance, whereas others disassociate themselves from politics altogether. The initiators of these projects essentially short-circuit meritocracy, and instead simply set up spaces where exhibitions, events, or meetings between peers can take place.

Defining the national infrastructure of artist-run centres as a hegemonic fossil like the culture industry makes these institutions even more vulnerable to the reactionary stance of those who would abolish them completely in favour of a laissez-faire free market model. Making “alternative spaces” viable within a liberal economical model would sound the death knell for the project of emancipation, which has been a drive of artistic practice since the late 1960s. On the other hand, only counting on the existence of temporary and flexible collaborative projects as an alternative aggravates the already precarious situation of cultural producers.

In becoming administrators of artist-run centres, artists often decide to put partly aside their individual

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practices to focus on collectively decided goals. Since the end of the 1960s, this undertaking took the form of a dialogical project (with all the antagonisms that this implies) where the identity of the institution was more or less constantly put into question, depending on the capacity of the individuals involved to commit themselves to a community. A small sample of artists (mostly American and European) occupied an in-between arena as they questioned the semantic coherence of alternative spaces, much like practitioners of institutional critique targeted public museums and commercial galleries. However, some of them paradoxically integrated these ethical stances into their own individual trajectories. Andrea Fraser's texts on the genealogy of the notion of service in the art field disregards, to some extent, situations where the artist acts as a mediator in a group and asks his or her colleagues to examine the conditions that inform their relationships under the guise of a collective political project.

The New York cooperative Orchard was born from a reappraisal of institutional critique's failure while assimilating at the same time the limits of the concept of self-determination.<sup>46</sup> However, Orchard gathered a community of peers whose members were also already influential in the larger art world. Thus, the reflexive approach of individuals within this collective setting became somewhat paradoxical. Created in 2005, it brought together artists associated with the second wave of institutional critique, filling the void left by the closure of commercial galleries that had valorized these practices over the previous decade. According to the original intentions of the founders, Orchard had been designed to have a limited lifespan and thus was dissolved three years later. As opposed to the early "alternative spaces" founded in the 1970s, such as Artists' Space or White Columns, it defined itself from the outset as a for-profit organization. The collective's activities constituted an informal structure on which each individual was able to capitalize, monetarily or symbolically. Moreover, thanks to the celebrity status of some of the members of the group, their brand of collective reflexivity was immediately noticed and commented upon. Orchard's ephemeral existence was thus guaranteed a place in art history.<sup>47</sup>

The persistence of a rather vexing dialectic between exemplary and ordinary strains of reflexivity explains, in my view, the difficulties in bringing together an evaluation of institutional critique and the historiography of self-determination in the art field, particularly through its Canadian manifestations. This is despite the fact that both discursive formations were born of the same era, the late 1960s and early 1970s, a period when artists were trying to rid themselves of the middlemen, while at the same time rejecting a division of labour inherited from modernism. For some, writing and publishing art criticism exacerbated intentionality, whereas for others, the administration of alternative spaces became a way to control the context and presentation of works and to disturb the eventhood of the exhibition. Institutional critique reached a dead end when its practitioners and commentators began to realize that a synthesis between two incompatible positions was now an impossible project: one could not be inside and outside the institution. The failure of the self-determination paradigm in establishing itself in the field of art is the result of a similar assessment: artists relied on their ability to divert the protocols of legitimization they associated with hegemonic structures (e.g., the state and the market). However, they filled a vacant space by occupying the professional categories that had been previously deemed obsolete (e.g., the curator, the administrator). In Canada, the structure undergirding artist-run centres is no longer within the control of those who created it. What was put into place through the exercise of "free will" is itself free from free will, functioning essentially on its own.

In concluding, I need to step back to reexamine the methodological shortcomings that are at the core of this essay. Firstly, I tried to nuance somewhat the statement that institutional critique is essentially absent in Canada, and I tried to present a counter-history. This was the goal of the incomplete chronology with which I began the article. However, I was obliged to relinquish this project because it became increasingly difficult, and then impossible, to define the limits of a "national" rubric under which such narrative fragments could be placed. Artist Hito Steyerl evokes the paradoxes inherent in the conceptual montage of an "institution of critique," calling for both a utopian emphasis on dialogic public

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space and an acknowledgment of the failure of reflexivity.<sup>48</sup> She doesn't, however, mention that some protagonists play the double role of disseminators of knowledge and gatekeepers in this configuration, deciding how and when knowledge is distributed. Andrea Fraser's account of how Canadian sources influenced her practice of the 1990s—and consolidated the second wave of institutional critique—shows that theoretical references only circulated in one direction: from the centre to the peripheries. Though institutional critique was born of its protagonists' over-awareness of context, their blindness to the hegemonic discursive formation it had essentially become since the end of the 1980s was a major oversight, to say the least. Nevertheless, in Canada, we seem to recycle metropolitan trends as quickly as possible in a desperate attempt to make up for lost time, or conversely, we reject them all outright, as they no longer seem relevant to our preoccupations. Slowing down and more carefully considering the failures or successes of cultural transfers might be one way to get rid of this double-sided automatism that is also a form of engrained provincialism. Some bodies of knowledge easily leave their initial contexts to circulate freely whereas others remain entangled within a restricted circle of interlocutors and a specific locale. At the end of the day, the notion of self-determination, less and less relevant here in Canada, is perhaps irreconcilable with institutional critique. Time might have come to invent new concepts.

### **Post Scriptum**

While writing this article, did I avoid the pitfalls of producing an all-encompassing analysis, where the author speaks for others and makes generalized statements without putting them on trial through conversation with one's peers? The English translation arrived too late to be read and reviewed. However, I asked my translator (the only reader, excluding the editors of this issue) to come up with a new title for this essay, since my initial proposal (which worked well in my mother tongue) was impossible to render in English. For me, the aborted title<sup>49</sup> was more than anything else a tentative answer to the rhetorical question posed by those who invited me to publish here: "Is there a space for art outside the market and the state?"

**A Montreal-based independent critic and curator, Vincent Bonin has developed multifaceted and wide-ranging projects including *Documentary Protocols (1967–75)*, an exhibition and publication presented by the Leonard and Bina Ellen Art Gallery at Concordia University from 2007 to 2008 that examined the administrative ethos in artistic practices of the 1960s and 1970s in Canada. He is currently co-curator of *Materializing "Six Years": Lucy R. Lippard and the Emergence of Conceptual Art*, which will be at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum Fall 2012 and co-curator of the Montreal section of the travelling exhibition *Traffic: Conceptual Art in Canada 1965–80*.**

**"Here, Bad News Always Arrives Too Late: Institutional Critique in Canada (1967–2012): A Chronology," by Vincent Bonin, is the second in a series of translations co-produced by *Fillip* and *Red Hook Journal*. The first, Diedrich Diedrichsen's "Living in the Loop" appeared in *Red Hook Journal*'s inaugural issue and was printed in *Fillip* 14.**

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Notes:

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1. This event is commented on by Susan Alter Tateshi in “The House that Jack Built: Fifteen Years Later,” *Carfac News* 10, no. 2 (Summer 1985), 2–3.
  2. On January 3, 1969, Vassilakis Takis broke into the MoMA and took back his kinetic artwork *Tele-sculpture* (1960), presented in the exhibition *The Machine as Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age*, curated by Pontus Hultén. Though the piece was owned by the museum, Takis claimed his repossession of the work to be a necessary act demonstrating artists’ rights to retain control over how their work is presented. Following this gesture, he distributed a communiqué entreating his peers to establish a forum where they might discuss the social function of the museum, as well as the apathy of cultural institutions towards the Vietnam War. Later that year, several of his colleagues (e.g., Carl André, Rosemarie Castoro, Hans Haacke, Lucy R. Lippard, Tom Lloyd, Willoughby Sharp, and Wen-Ying Tsai) would found the Art Workers’ Coalition with the goal of denouncing the collusion of New York museums with the military-industrial complex. On the Art Workers’ Coalition, see Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).
  3. For a detailed analysis of this project, see David Tomas, “The Dilemma of Categories and the Overdetermination of a Business Practice,” in *Protocoles documentaires/Documentary Protocols (1967–1975)*, ed. Vincent Bonin with the collaboration of Michèle Thériault (Montreal: Galerie Leonard et Bina Ellen, 2010), 217–54.
  4. Condé and Beveridge recount this period of their career in Clive Robertson, “The Art World and Its Other: Forever the Twain Shall Meet?” *Class Works*, ed. Bruce Barber (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2008), 37–44.
  5. For a review of the exhibition, see Eric Cameron, “C’est toujours de l’art pour privilégiés/It’s Still Privileged Art,” *Vie des arts* 21, no. 84 (1976), 60–61, 94.
  6. *Vocation/Vacation*, exhibition catalogue (Banff: Banff Centre, School of Fine Arts, Walter Phillips Gallery, 1981).
  7. Acquisition file of the work, National Gallery of Canada Archives, Ottawa (Voici Alcan 1972-3 1-3). In the press file, see Norman Provencher, “Alcan Attacks ‘Offensive’ Museum Exhibit,” *Citizen* (Ottawa), June 8, 1988; John Bentley Mays, “Too Much Ado about Artist’s Pot Shots at Alcan,” *Globe and Mail*, June 14, 1988.
  8. Andrea Fraser, “From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique,” *Institutional Critique and After*, ed. John C. Welchman (Los Angeles: Southern California Consortium of Art Schools; Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2006), 126. Proceeding from conference organized by the Southern California Consortium of Art Schools, Los Angeles County Museum, May 21, 2005.
  9. Andrea Fraser, “In and Out of Place,” in *Museum Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser*, ed. Alexander Alberro (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 17–28.
  10. Michael Asher, *Writings 1973–1983 on Works 1969–1979*, written in collaboration with Benjamin H.D. Buchloh (Halifax: Presses of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design; Los Angeles: Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, 1983); AA Bronson and Peggy Gale, eds., *Museums by Artists* (Toronto: Art Metropole, 1983).
  11. Bronson and Gale, eds., *Museums by Artists*, *Ibid.*, 9.

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12. Ibid., 10.

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13. Brian O'Doherty, "The Gallery As a Gesture," *Artforum*, December 1981, 26–34.
14. Kirsi Peltomäki, *Situation Aesthetics: The Work of Michael Asher* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010). See also Rachel Haidu's doctoral thesis, *The Absence of Work: Marcel Broodthaers, 1964–1976* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010). During her research, Haidu also consulted archival documents that enabled her to give narrative coherence to the more fragmentary and lesser-known project of the Belgian artist.
15. See Julia Bryan-Wilson, "A Curriculum for Institutional Critique, or the Professionalization of Conceptual Art," *Werksted*, no. 1 (2003), 89–109. The issue is titled "New Institutionalism," edited by Jonas Ekeberg.
16. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds., *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009).
17. Alexander Alberro, "Institutions, Critique, and Institutional Critique," in *Institutional Critique: An Anthology*, 2–19 and Blake Stimson, "What Was Institutional Critique?" in *Institutional Critique: An Anthology*, 20–41.
18. Alexander Alberro, "Institutions, Critique, and Institutional Critique," 5.
19. Alberro and Stimson's assessments were inspired in large part by Frazer Ward's 1995 analysis. See Frazer Ward, "The Haunted Museum: Institutional Critique and Publicity," *October*, no. 73 (Summer 1995), 71–89.
20. Blake Stimson, "What Was Institutional Critique?" 31.
21. In allowing their employees a certain amount of self-determination in the organization of work, they have hijacked the project of emancipation of the 1960s, and, by the same token, neutralized their adversaries. This artistic subjectivity, traditionally exempt from the laws of supply and demand, now represents a surplus value within a system of exchange where knowledge has become commodity. Not unlike Peter Bürger's assessments published a few decades before *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Chiapello and Boltanski's observations disturb the theoretical foundations of an avant-garde that claims to be a catalyst of social change. In effect, the subversive gestures and political engagement of artists no longer represents a threat, but has rather become capital gain in the context of a flexible and all-encompassing market economy. When brought back into the field of contemporary art, the arguments developed in this chapter are often used to discredit institutional critique by demonstrating that reflexivity is now a mere object of speculation within a market adapted to absorb all forms of subversion. Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, "À l'épreuve de la critique artiste," in *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), 501–76. Translated into English under the title: *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 2006). See also: Ève Chiapello, "Evolution and Cooptation: The 'Artist Critique' of Management and Capitalism," *Third Text* 18, no. 6 (2004), 585–94.
22. Luc Boltanski, *De la critique: Précis de sociologie de l'émancipation* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009).
23. Ibid., 105. Our translation.
24. Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," 105.
25. See Andrea Fraser, *Museum Highlights: The Writings of Andrea Fraser*, ed. Alexander Alberro

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(Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005). For a discussion about the work of this second wave of practitioners, see James Meyer, *What Happened to the Institutional Critique?* (New York: American Fine Arts Co., 1993). This exhibition was held at the American Fine Arts Co. Gallery (New York) in 1993, and gathered the works of Tom Burr, Mark Dion, Andrea Fraser, Renée Green, Zoe Leonard, Christian Philipp Müller, and Fred Wilson. In his curatorial text, Meyer expanded the rubric of institutional critique to address such issues as the AIDS crisis, notably through an assessment of artist Greg Bordowitz's important activist work of the 1990s.

26. In Germany, the "label" has been extended to include "Kontext Kunst," a category somewhat hastily put together by certain curators in search of an artistic movement upon which they might append their signature.<sup>26</sup> Stefan Germer, co-founder with Isabelle Graw of the magazine *Texte Zur Kunst*, published an article in 1995 where he sets out to debunk the myth that artists of the "second wave" (Christian Philipp Müller, Fareed Armaly, Mark Dion, Andrea Fraser, and Renée Green, among others) somehow formed a community of elective affinities, and that their individual standpoints could collectively represent a subject of pure intellectual debate in the margins of the market.<sup>27</sup> While defending the work of these artists, Isabelle Graw questions the emancipatory dimension of institutional critique since its targets, such as the museum and the commercial gallery, have become difficult to define, and also because the critical tradition that they have inherited has itself been co-opted by capitalism. The Austrian curator Peter Weibel coined the rubric "Kontext Kunst" for an exhibition that he organized at the Neue Galerie im Künstlerhaus in 1993. See *Kontext Kunst*, Peter Weibel, ed., *Kunst der 90er Jahre* (Graz: Neue Galerie im Künstlerhaus, 1992). Catalogue of the exhibition.

27. Stefan Germer, "Parmi les vautours, L'art contextuel dans son contexte," in *Une Anthologie de la revue Texte Zur Kunst de 1990 à 1998*, eds. Catherine Chevalier and Andreas Fohr (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2011), 384–401.

28. Isabelle Graw, "Beyond Institutional Critique", in *Institutional Critique and After*, 147.

29. See Nina Möntmann, ed., *Art and Its Institutions: Current Conflicts, Critique and Collaboration* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2006).

30. See Simon Sheikh, "The Trouble with Institutions, or, Art and Its Publics", in *Art and Its Institutions*, 142–49. For another perspective on this redefinition of curators as co-authors in the exhibition context, especially as it relates to institutional reflexivity, see Marianne Eigenheer, Barnaby Drabble, and Dorothee Richter, eds., *Curating Critique* (Frankfurt am Main: Revolver, 2007).

31. See *Art and Its Institutions: Current Conflicts, Critique and Collaboration* and Nina Möntmann, "The Rise and Fall of New Institutionalism, Perspectives on a Possible Future," European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies, August 2007, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0407/moentmann/en>.

32. See Boris Buden, "What Is the eipcp? An Attempt at Interpretation," European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies, July 2007, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0407/buden1/en>.

33. Gerald Raunig, "Instituent Practices: Fleeing, Instituting, Transforming," in *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique*, eds. Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray (London: MayFlyBooks, 2009), 3–12.

34. In the same book, Stefan Nowotry makes similar observations. See Stefan Nowotry, "Anti-Canonization: The Differential Knowledge of Institutional Critique," in *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice*, 21–28.

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35. See Andrea Fraser, "Speaking of the Social World," *Texte Zur Kunst*, March 2011, 153–56.

36. AA Bronson, "The Humiliation of the Bureaucrat: Artist-Run Centres as Museums by Artists," *Museums by Artists*, 30.

37. Vincent Bonin, "Protocoles documentaires/Documentary Protocols," in *Protocoles documentaires/Documentary Protocols (1967–1975)*, 18–59

38. For a history of the impact of 1970s and 1980s American politics on alternative spaces, see Brian Wallis, "Public Funding and Alternative Spaces," *Alternative Art New York, 1965–1985*, ed. Julie Ault (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; London: The Drawing Center, 2002), 161.

39. In a conference given in 1999, Ken Lum describes the prosperous era of the mid 1980s, a period when artists enjoyed the full extent of the "funding complex":

"In a perfect cradle to coffin scenario, a Canadian artist in 1980 could conceivably receive a financial grant from the government to produce work, which could then be shown in an artist run space from which the artist would receive an exhibition fee and perhaps a residency stipend. The artist could get to the place of exhibition with assistance from a Travel Grant. Afterwards, the artist could make a submission to the Canada Council Art Bank to purchase the exhibited art. A jury comprised of [sic] other artists, each representative of a region in Canada, would make a decision about purchase. If at some future time, the artist would like to repurchase work sold to the Art Bank, he or she need only pay the original purchase price plus a supplementary charge for storage, maintenance and administration for the period the work was kept in the Art Bank. The important point is that at every stage of this hypothetical but highly possible scenario, Canadian artists are the ones to don the hats of the curator, the critic and the collector. In the name of a non-hierarchical system of artistic measurement, Canadian artists would be evaluated first and foremost by Canadian artists, peer groups in effect, without the need to rely on expert opinions from non-artists." Ken Lum, "Canadian Cultural Policy: A Metaphysical Problem," paper given in Wroclaw, Poland, June 1999, <http://www.apexart.org/conference/lum.htm>.

40. Frank Georgi, ed., *Autogestion: La Dernière Utopie?* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 2003).

41. Georgi, "Avant-propos," *Autogestion*, 8.

42. Clive Robertson, *Policy Matters: Administration of Art and Culture* (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2006), 26.

43. Ibid.

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