



The institution of institutionalism: difference, universalism and the legacies of Institutional Critique

Carlos Garrido Castellano

To cite this article: Carlos Garrido Castellano (2017): The institution of institutionalism: difference, universalism and the legacies of Institutional Critique, Culture, Theory and Critique, DOI: [10.1080/14735784.2017.1410438](https://doi.org/10.1080/14735784.2017.1410438)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14735784.2017.1410438>



Published online: 17 Dec 2017.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



The institution of institutionalism: difference, universalism and the legacies of Institutional Critique

Carlos Garrido Castellano

Centro de Estudos Comparatistas/Instituto de História de Arte, Universidade de Lisboa, Lisbon, Portugal

ABSTRACT

This text analyses the relationship between institutionalism, context and cultural criticism. Its main objective is to identify how universalism has permeated the different waves of Institutional Critique, conditioning the subversive potential conferred to creative practices and locating radical, alternative institutionalism within the narrow geo-cultural landscape of mainstream biennials. Taking as point of departure Cildo Meireles's participatory public intervention in *documenta 11*, I consider how representational concerns are privileged vis-à-vis visual practices related to coloniality and difference. From that position, the article argues that only by challenging the assumed universality of the debates on cultural institutionalism will we be able to stress the relevance of critique in addressing cultural policies and non-representational practices. This implies confronting the troublesome relationship between Institutional Critique and modernity from a 'geographically-informed' position capable of recognising institutionalism as a heterogeneous body of practices that are being globally transformed.

To be effective, a cultural critique must show the links between the major articulations of power and the more-or-less trivial aesthetics of everyday life. It must reveal the systematicity of social relations and their compelling character for everyone involved, even while it points to the specific discourses, images and emotional attitudes that hide inequality and raw violence. Holmes (2002: 107).

Institutionality is first and foremost a question of scale. Stimson, (2010: 161).

2002

Cildo Meireles's contribution to *documenta 11* took the form of a collaborative public project. In *Disappearing Element/Disappeared Element*, Meireles used the network of street vendors swarming Kassel during the celebration of *documenta* to sell unflavoured popsicles. This intervention took place in various locations in Kassel during the three months of *documenta*. The gesture of selling water in a more sophisticated form grants institutional criticism geopolitical aspirations: on the one hand, the work deals with material exchanges and resources taking place in a transnational scenario; on the other, it operates within the quintessential international scenario of *documenta*, one of the

most relevant forums of contemporary art worldwide. Meireles' participatory project also engages the relationship between art prestige, economics and ecology; in that sense, the act of selling water in the form of popsicles appears as a metaphor for the relationship between artistic production, use and value, while also alluding to how basic resources such as water are becoming more and more scarce. These are just some of the layers at play in Meireles's intervention.

Dealing with *Disappearing Element/Disappeared Element*, Alexander Alberro has also pointed out that it accomplishes several goals: it continues the unmasking of inequalities between centre and periphery carried on by the Brazilian artistic avant-garde to which Meireles belongs; it denounces the volatility of a globalised and biennial-driven art world; it poses timely questions on materiality, environmentalism, sustainability, consumerism and privatisation; and finally, it interweaves 'institutions and global phenomena' (Alberro 2006: 302), uncoupling the connection between Institutional Critique and local realities. Meireles's project in *documenta* can also be interpreted as epitomising the continuities with and distance from the first manifestations of Institutional Critique in the 1960s and 1970s:¹ in *Disappearing Element*, the object of criticism is not located within the four walls of an art gallery or with a museum's board of trustees; rather, Meireles points at a much wider, global and invisible set of power relations perpetuated by biennials and mega-exhibitions such as *documenta*. 'The whole structure of the blockbuster exhibition', argues Alberro, 'is what ultimately is commented and casted [*sic*] into doubt in *Disappearing Element/Disappeared Element*' (303).

This last point bears special interest for the objectives of this article. What does it mean to cast into doubt the 'whole structure of the blockbuster exhibition' from within? What does the selection of *documenta* to stand for transnational power relations within the art world imply here? What lessons can we learn from Meireles's intervention? Is there any other way of weaving together 'institutions and global phenomena'?

Looking back over almost 15 years, given the proliferation of art projects emerging in the transnational context of art biennales and their expansion across the globe, the critical aspirations that one can associate with similar artistic interventions have become less critically incisive due to their frequency. As Filipovic (2005) has explained, although biennials emerged with the intention of countering the centrality of mainstream art museums, they quickly became regulatory instruments setting out the rules of artistic contemporaneity. For Filipovic, the consequences of this process are ambivalent. She writes:

These perennial exhibitions ... perceive themselves as temporally punctual infrastructures that remain forever contemporary and unburdened by collecting and preserving what the vagaries of time render simply modern. The aim to be the paradigmatic alternative to the museum cuts both ways, however, with positive and negative distinctions. The proliferation of biennials in the nineteen-nineties rendered them new privileged sites for cultural tourism and introduced a category of art, the bombastic proportions and hollow premises of which earned it the name 'biennial art', a situation that knotted the increasingly spectacular events to market interests. That mega-exhibitions can be compromised is a frequent lament, but in their best moments, they offer a counterproposal to the regular programming of the museum as well as occasions for artists to trespass institutional walls and defy the neat perimeter to which the traditional institution often strictly adheres when it organizes

¹The work of artists such as Hans Haacke, Daniel Buren, Michael Asher or Marcel Broodthaert is commonly discussed in relation to this first phase of Institutional Critique.

exhibitions (although museums, it must be said, are increasingly challenging their own once-staid protocols.

Even if there is then always a risk of recuperation by market forces, projects such as Meireles's retain the potential to perform a critique of institutions. In these projects, the artist chooses a particular institutional context, in this case that of *documenta*, in order to subvert its value system. Curated by Okwui Enwezor (the first non-European art director of the event), *documenta 11* introduced a drastic revamping of the biennial format: on this occasion, it included transdisciplinary 'platforms' in St. Lucia, New Delhi, Vienna and Lagos. The curatorial team, composed of Carlos Basualdo, Ute Meta Bauer, Susanne Ghez, Sarat Maharaj, Mark Nash, and Octavio Zaya, was also far more ethnically and culturally diverse than in previous editions. The challenge that Meireles posed to art biennales can be seen, thus, as holding global aspirations: what the work seeks to comment on, what is cast into doubt is nothing less than a whole system of exchange and recognition. However, in *Disappearing Element/Disappeared Element*, the symbol of institutional power, its locus, is still identified with the site of privilege that Kassel and *documenta* constitute. The critical potential of *Disappearing Element* arises from a contradiction: on the one hand, the work challenges the attribution of institutional power to the museum or the art gallery, locating it within a transnational network holding art biennales; on the other, the 'provincial' locus of *documenta* is still chosen as the perfect location to ground that transnational act of criticism.

Although sympathetic in many respects to Alberro's approach, my interests here will nonetheless follow a different path. Returning to Meireles's intervention as a point of departure to think about Institutional Critique's democratising role, in this text I will argue that space, and more specifically the location of institutional power and institutional critique within the specific place of the mega-exhibition, arises as one of the main pitfalls in new attempts to redefine both practices.² Touching briefly on *Disappearing Element*, this article seeks to understand how certain places can still be seen as more suitable than others to introduce discussions on global configurations. This is by no means an element exclusive to *Disappearing Element*. On the contrary; whereas there has been a recent interest in expanding the scope of institutional practices to include decolonial, institution, infrastructural and organisational approaches and actions, these have not been followed by a (much-needed) process of revising how the articulation between 'institutions and global phenomena' does not constitute a natural correlation.

In that sense, delving into and intertwining alternative geographies and genealogies of institutional gestures arising from contexts other than Euramerica still arises as an objective yet to be accomplished. In short, when artists attempt to approach institutional power not as it is embodied in a physical museum or gallery space, but rather as a set of transnational rules and power relations, the place associated with criticism continues to be coupled with the provincial scenario of mainstream Western biennales. In a seminal article first published in 1974, the Australian art critic and historian Terry Smith defined provincialism as an obligation of some artistic contexts to become acquainted with the major trends in European and American art, which would also turn their

²There is no single definition of institutional power. The attempts at restaging the potentiality of this kind of creative practice are, as we will see, very much dependent on that ambiguity, as well as on the shifting conditions under which institutional power is exerted and displayed.

production into something outmoded or dependent upon these trends.³ Strongly rejecting this logic, Smith posed the question of the provincialism of art metropolises such as New York, pointing out how some artists and art movements are granted universal value, whereas other (equally transnational) genealogies are understood as belonging to a unique context. Following this logic, it is possible to affirm that the genealogy of Institutional Critique remains one of the most provincial and geographically narrow genealogies of contemporary artistic practice,⁴ despite the recently expressed interest in incorporating a few cases as global ‘precedents’ or ‘influences’ of the canonical, Western genealogies of Institutional Critique and Conceptual Art.⁵ Exploring the consequences of this provincialism and finding potential critical answers to it are the main tasks pursued in this article.

Institutional critique

Before undertaking this task, a brief description of Institutional Critique’s objectives and genealogies is in order. Institutional Critique emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as a way of generating awareness of the institutional context in which artworks were inserted, while also criticising this medium. Buchloh (1990: 136) connected the appearance of this interest in engaging institutions critically with the evolution of Minimal and Conceptual Art, pointing out how artworks were indissolubly connected to the institutional context in which they are displayed, while highlighting the importance of issues of autonomy and ownership. Heterogeneous in the forms adopted, the first attempts to engage critically with the institution focussed on revealing that the apparently neutral walls of the museum or art gallery in fact represented a complex, far-from-innocent socioeconomic system. By revealing the elements at play behind this neutral image, artists sought to generate awareness among the public regarding the role of cultural institutions in society. The activity of Hans Haacke in the early 1970s is symptomatic of this interest. For example, in his MoMA poll displayed in 1970 he asked visitors to vote on politically oriented topics. One year later, he disclosed the real-estate holdings of one of the Guggenheim Museum trustees. The list of artists associated with this first wave of Institutional Critique is commonly reduced to the quartet formed by Haacke, Daniel Buren, Michael Asher and Marcel Broodthaers. The work of these artists is also committed to laying bare the contradictions of institutional neutrality, be these physical, administrative or economic.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the work of the members of the so-called second wave of Institutional Critique marked a move away from limitations of this ‘publicness’. Previously,

³Smith (1974: 58–59) summarises this logic by arguing that

the provincial artist, then, sees his commitment to art in terms of *styles* of art of competing notions of art’s *history* – all determined in the metropolitan center. The main structure of his self-image is accepted, not invented. Self-construction, at levels that he might feel to be fundamental, constantly eludes him, especially as he makes his art.

⁴There are, however, some remarkable exceptions. See, for example, the debates gathered in the last decade by the *Conceptualismos del Sur*: <https://redcsur.net/> or *EIPCP Transform* (<http://eipcp.net/>) Networks. On the importance of extradisciplinary interactions in breaking with the hierarchies of the art world, see Expósito (2006), Holmes (2011).

⁵The provincialism of Institutional Critique has been pointed out in several times, although it has not been tackled deeply enough. Examples of this can be found in Skrebowski (2013), Green (2006, 2014), Nowotny (2009) and Graw (2005, 2006). The discrepancies between these authors evidence how underscoring the need to overcome the canonisation of Institutional Critique has not been followed by a critical rethinking of the global settings in which institutional dynamics are inserted nowadays.

criticality was dependent on the belief that an aseptic, ‘outsider’ position was possible for the artist. For artists like Andrea Fraser, Fred Wilson or Renee Green, this is no longer possible. The interiorisation of institutional power would be one of the major differences with the previous body of artists, fuelled by the experience of seeing how institutions ‘institutionalise’ critique for their own purposes.⁶ Artists began conceiving of themselves as part of an art system that cannot be reduced to the material symbol of the museum or the art gallery. On the contrary, the whole system of interpersonal, socioeconomic relations involved in contemporary art would be considered institutional. At this point, the objective of criticism changed: the point would no longer be to look for hints and uncover the truth; rather, artists would attempt to determine how can they make use of their own position of privilege within the art system (within the institution) in order to transform it.

Institutional critique’s blind spots

The claim that the locus of institutional power has remained attached to a set of fixed places may seem unrealistic in light of the increasing transnationalism to which the art world is subjected. Nowadays it would seem naïve to represent institutional power through the walls of a museum or an art gallery. Rather, a vague set of economic and political relations without a fixed centre and operating globally is the shape that comes to our mind when imagining the institutional side of artistic contemporaneity (see Smith 2012, 2016). Artists like Fred Wilson, Andrea Fraser and Renee Green have made great contributions in transforming the ‘non-site’ of the art exhibition into the ubiquitous site of artistic production (see Green 2000), and in introducing issues of race and gender into conversations on institutionalism.⁷ The work of Fraser (2005) has been particularly useful in clarifying that artists are also part of the institutional fabric even when they criticise it, being therefore incapable of determining a reality outside institutional power. However, it is striking how discussions of Institutional Critique have remained attached to an engagement with specific locations and contexts in a few well-known institutional settings such as major museums or Western-based biennials.⁸

While many new voices have been invited to the debates on Institutional Critique, thus challenging the view of the movement as a derivation of the (European and American) avant-garde, the histories of institutional power, the debunking of institutional authority and the articulation of strategic and active corollaries to Institutional Critique’s negativity coming from the Global South are still unacknowledged or, to a large degree, absent.⁹ This absence marks a continuity that extends through the evolution of Institutional Critique

⁶This idea was already present in Buchlow’s first attempt to define Institutional Critique. In his classic essay ‘Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions’ (1990: 140), he affirms, prophetically:

The critical annihilation of cultural conventions itself immediately acquires the conditions of the spectacle, that the insistence on artistic anonymity and the demolition of authorship produces instant brand names and identifiable products, and that the campaign to critique conventions of visibility with textual interventions, billboard signs, anonymous handouts, and pamphlets inevitably ends by following the pre-established mechanisms of advertising and marketing campaigns.

⁷Wilson’s *Mining the Museum* remains as one of the most celebrated steps in that sense. See Doro (2011).

⁸The incorporation of biennials as symbols of institutional privilege does not contradict this; on the contrary, it has tended to narrow the list of usual suspects.

⁹The understanding of ‘South’ proposed in this article is related to postcolonial criticism’s interest in expanding and updating the notion of Third World. See, for example, Prashad (2013).

across decades, manifestations and interests. From the 'phenomenological' and national approach to institutional power present in the so called 'first wave', to the inclusion of gender-based and ethnic approaches that took place in the 1980s and early 1990s exemplified in the work of Fred Wilson or Renee Green, to the most recent attempts in resurrecting Institutional Critique (see, for example, Alberro and Stimson 2009; Raunig and Ray 2009; Steyerl 2006), the imagination of institutional power and *the art institution* (singular) remains a neutral, objective and one-sided presence irrespective of where it materialises.

Given this predicament, a potential objective arises: to understand how Institutional Critique's universalism has remained untouched despite the 'postcolonial turn' of artists like Fred Wilson and Renee Green, despite projects such as *Disappearing Element*. The approach to universalism proposed in this article borrows from postcolonial theory's interest in criticising how certain authors and ideas are conferred universal validity, whereas others are confined to narrower, 'local' cultural configurations. In his seminal work *Provincializing Europe*, Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) already stressed how the dialectic between universalism and provincialism was crucial in the construction of intellectual and historical traditions.¹⁰ With regard to art institutions and Institutional Critique, universalism can be approached in at least three different ways, all of them closely related to the critical aspirations outlined above: first, the widespread existence of contemporary art institutions around the globe cannot be detached from the creation and global expansion of the museum understood as a modern, Western contrivance determining what should be displayed and how (see Clifford 1988; Hodder 2012). Secondly, museums and cultural institutions endeavour to democratise culture and to have a public impact while expanding their social contribution to increasingly larger sectors of the population. Finally, the critical task developed by artists using Institutional Critique is supposed to reclaim, stress or recover this public commitment, thus bolstering the social role of cultural institutions.

Under this logic, the privilege of exhibitional over infrastructural forms in the construction of world art views and the confinement of institutional power within a narrow range of Western art events should be identified as part of a more complex demarcation, coming along with a parallel process of de-institutionalising and capturing postcolonial visual practices. In other words, the global display of many practices related to postcolonial cultural configurations often takes place only after the complex negotiations between artists and (local and transnational) institutional entities are erased from the equation. World art views have privileged display over infrastructure, ephemerality and flexibility over duration, exhibiting over instituting. The latter terms are not absent from current debates in creative practices, but they are normally attached in contemporary criticism to the centres of cultural and economic power. For instance, projects such as the Center for Historical Reenactments or District 6 in South Africa or collaborative, research-driven projects such as the Pan African Network of Independent Contemporaneity (PANIC) are at the forefront of discussions on alternative art spaces and horizontally led institutions.¹¹ These initiatives, however, are often still interpreted as belated replicas of Western

¹⁰Chakrabarty (2000: 5) outlines how a similar dynamic applies to time as well, arguing that 'It is only within some very particular traditions of thinking that we treat fundamental thinkers who are long dead and gone not only as people belonging to their own times but also as though they were our own contemporaries'.

¹¹For a discussion on African alternative institutional practices, see Kouoh (2013). The PANIC project can be accessed at: <http://panicplatform.net/>

phenomena, and consequently identified as derivative. Something similar happens in socially engaged art, where ‘peripheral’ initiatives (Tucumán Arde and Ala Plástica in Argentina or the Frente 3 de Fevereiro in Brazil can be mentioned among the most active and innovative cases) are playing a crucial role in granting socially engaged art its international relevance (see Kester 2011). The international purchase of certain forms of artistic creation, in other words, can only be understood as the result of the crossings emerging out of global experiences and experiments, in which ‘Southern’ initiatives are in many cases leading the way. These initiatives are redefining what we understand an art institution to be, thus challenging the Western technology of the museum and its impact on territories subjected to different forms of colonial power relations. Because of this, it is impossible to calibrate the enhanced weight of alternative institutional practices in a provincial way, without taking into account that novelty and innovation are originating more and more from ‘Southern’ artistic contexts. In a similar way, it is also impossible to maintain a view of the production associated with these contexts limited to the form of the exhibition or the biennial. As the examples offered here reveal, nowadays an increasingly large number of artists and art practitioners from all over the world are producing alternative organisational modes, confronting central infrastructural concerns of their societies and creating enduring platforms and networks. It is from that standpoint that the selection of *documenta* as a paradigm for transient transnational relations can be seen as problematic.

Universalism, then and now

Disappearing Element/Disappeared Element reveals both the pitfalls and the persistence of Institutional Critique when addressing institutional power in the form of transnational art biennials. Whoever buys Meireles’s unflavoured popsicles is not just buying a refreshment: she is also denouncing the commodification of natural resources, criticising the use-value of artistic exchanges, and censuring the spectacular character of mega-exhibitions like *documenta* (see Miller 2005). There is, of course, sufficient ambivalence in the work to allow an opposite interpretation: we could equally affirm that that person is taking part in the commodification of natural resources, sanctioning the use-value of artistic exchanges and supporting the spectacular character of mega-exhibitions. This ambivalence is shared by many installations appealing for the implication of spectators or biennial-based projects,¹² which will not be further discussed here. If Meireles’s work in *documenta* is reinserted here, it is because it epitomises a more crucial contradiction: no matter what interpretation we make of it, the project stands for a *located materialisation of an intangible network of financial global exchanges*, a network whose *tangibility* the subsequent years of the present century would painfully reveal. The project is, in this sense, dependent on a conceptualisation of biennial space as the appropriate place for criticism with universal bearing. Being versatile, multi-layered and pointed as it is, *Disappearing Element/Disappeared Element* seeks at once to make an intervention into global politics and the art world. Whereas the buyer of Meireles’s popsicles is propelled into the ubiquity and

¹²The first reference that comes to mind here is inevitably Felix González-Torres’s *Untitled. Portrait of Ross in L.A.* Although González-Torres’s practice has had a vast list of followers, the political and activist dimensions of his work are not so often apparent. For a discussion on how Relational Aesthetics has approached González-Torres, see Bishop (2004, 2006, 2012), Kester (2004), Purves and Aslan Selzer (2015), Wright (2004).

non-site of global capitalism, this happens through the very specific landscape of *documenta*. The act of buying and eating the popsicle *stands for* intervening and disrupting the realm of the political.¹³ Understood from this angle (given the experience of recent years) and compared to less cosmetic and more location-specific forms of artistic intervention applied to environmental issues such as the Dakota Access Pipeline protest in the United States, the work of artists such as Ravi Agarwal and Tushar Joag in India, or the activity of Goddy Leye in derelict spaces in Douala, Cameroon, *Disappearing Element* enacts an illusion of universalism performed by the artist and sanctioned by the institution in the precise and safeguarded space of the biennial. Institutional Critique's main aspiration (to ensure the fulfilment of art institutions' democratising and public role), when appearing in its most reductive and conflating version, namely universalism, can also represent its main burden.

The consequences of this affirmation are relevant since they determine the currency of criticism at a time marked by commonality and alternative, critical institutionalism, but also by precariousness, privatisation and art banking (see Steyerl 2016). It is not just that 'Southern' histories of institutionalism have been forgotten and discarded, thereby embedding Institutional Critique's history exclusively within the most canonical version of the avant-garde (Brian-Wilson 2003) but, rather, that a whole notion of what institutional power is has been institutionalised, universalised and made natural, conditioning not only what is perceived as power, but also the potential responses to it.

The clamour for universalism in Institutional Critique is indissolubly linked to its belonging to modernity and to its aspirations to bring back art's public dimension (Alberro 2009). In 1974 Hans Haacke argued (2005, 53):

Irrespective of the 'avant-garde' or 'conservative', 'rightist' or 'leftist' stance a museum might take, it is, among other things, a carrier of socio-political connotations. By the very structure of its existence, it is a political institution. This is as true for museums in Moscow or Peking as for a museum in Cologne or the Guggenheim Museum. The question of private or public funding of the institution does not affect this axiom.

The aspiration toward transparency in institutional power found in artists like Haacke also expresses a desire to transform institutional space into a public sphere. By denouncing the supposed neutrality of the white cube, the first practitioners of Institutional Critique attempted to display the implicit mechanisms of political and economic power and privilege underlying the apparently democratic walls of artistic institutions. The artistic practices that, in the late 1960s and 1970s, came to be referred to as Institutional Critique revisited that radical promise of the European Enlightenment with the intent of confronting the art institutions with the claim that they were not sufficiently committed to the pursuit of publicness that had brought them into being in the first place (Stimson 2010), let alone stimulating or fulfilling. In this sense, the works of artists such as Hans Haacke and Daniel Buren were coupled with a promise: the production of public exchange, of a public subject, of a public sphere within the specific field of art.¹⁴

¹³This negativity implies a refusal to engage on a closer level with the economic exchanges which artworks criticise. Kester (2013) locates this fear within an aesthetic trajectory of distancing that extends from Kant and Schiller to Adorno. The consequence of this distancing would be to place the horizon of change always within some ungraspable future, consequently dismissing any urgency for engagement in the here and now.

¹⁴In Steyerl's words (2006): 'the claims that the first wave of institutional critique voiced were of course founded in contemporary theories of the public sphere, and based on an interpretation of the cultural institution as a potential public sphere'.

In the work of the artists previously ascribed to the so-called second wave of Institutional Critique, subjective values and consciousness acquired a more important role. The point was not to address how ideology is hidden beneath the neutral appearance of institutional display, but rather to see how that ideology affects the individuals interacting within art contexts (be they artists, audiences, curators, etc.) in heterogeneous ways. In such cases, artists called attention to the authoritarianism of art institutions, which is frequently manifested through selective and exclusive means. Difference, immateriality and self-reflexivity were, then, stressed in order to deepen and continue the claim for a public sphere. However, a level of self-defeatism also permeated those practices: the demands for inclusion and equality were appropriated by the institution itself, which were then addressed in shrewdly reformist ways. When creators associated with 'difference' were to engage with art institutions, they somehow remained subjected to a logic of inclusion/exclusion, as if their position had to be measured by the degree to which they negotiated or represented a position within 'the' institution, this being understood as the art market, the museum or some more diffuse or expanded field.¹⁵ From this standpoint, the plurality of origins and the productive experiments in alternative institutionalism emerging in non-Western contexts were excluded from criticism. Even from the 'difference-informed' point of view of artists like Wilson – whose landmark installation *Mining the Museum* displayed at the Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore is recognised as one of the most influential artistic interventions of this movement – Western museums and institutional structures are identified as the target for criticism and recognised as the 'enemy' trapping the artist. Similarly, Andrea Fraser's idea of institutional power as an interiorised, inescapable influence is dependent on the assumption that resistance and difference have been at best incorporated into the dialogue taking place within the institutional domain or, at worst, tamed and captured within the confines of institutional will. However, Fraser's position is only possible if the 'we' she conceives simultaneously as apprehended and integrating institutional agency reaches the entire art system. And that is simply not possible. The 'there is no solution to the interiorisation of institutional power' position adopted by Fraser (2005) can therefore be understood in a similar vein. The relationship between universalism and the most recent attempts at resurrecting Institutional Critique are no less problematic. The solutions we find nowadays, based on an incorporation of the 'reformist' potentiality of critique within the institution (terms such as 'New Institutionalism' and 'Horizontal Institutions' would fit here) and an increase in self-reflexivity, or in active, infrastructural gestures, maintain to some extent the homogeneous identification of institutional power of previous moments. Sheikh (2006) and Hito Steyerl have called for an 'institutionalised critique', an active and vigilant attitude. Raunig (2007) has defined, *via* Virno and Agamben, an 'instituent paradigm' which implies an active way out of the 'pessimism' of previous generations, incorporating a highly positive element: criticism does not need to be only deconstructive, it can also endeavour to produce alternatives. There is no doubt that these 'new' debates are defining agency and institutionalism in more complex terms, taking Institutional Critique back to a

¹⁵This shift in representational techniques by the cultural institution has also mirrored a trend in criticism itself, namely the shift from a critique of institution toward a critique of representation. This trend, which was informed by Cultural Studies, feminist and postcolonial epistemologies, has somehow continued in the vein of the previous institutional critique by intuiting the entire sphere of representation as a public sphere.

productive, active role. The question, then, is how to expand and diversify this turn toward agency. The following sections will deal with this very issue.

The postcolonial exhibitionary complex

Disappearing Element represents a kind of artistic intervention associated with the temporary format of art biennials aimed at criticising the institutional framework surrounding them. It accomplishes this critical task in two different senses: first, it deals with economic exchanges taking place globally; second, it confronts that predicament in a supposedly global forum such as *documenta*. Through this double condition, it epitomises a migration of Institutional Critique from a local/national context to an expanded terrain that matches the 'biennial format'. This ascription is relevant, since the provincialism of Institutional Critique remains inseparable from the configuration of world art as a system privileging representation and temporary exhibition-making as the locus of criticism over any other place. The geo-strategic division between the politics of representation (critical yet not socially committed insights) and strategic, socially committed initiatives have contaminated many attempts to create worldly approaches to art, determining to a great extent the vocabulary we use to analyse both kind of projects (Kester 2015). Therefore, the supposedly global arena that biennials and other exhibitional practices constitute is dependent upon a process of presenting 'deep' investigative and creative practices as/within discursive or exhibitional representations.

What I refer to as a postcolonial exhibitionary complex has shaped the way art is produced and circulates nowadays globally. Following Bennett (2005), the concept seeks to define the ways in which institutions exercise control and install authority not by concealing but through exhibiting. For Bennett, the institutions of confinement and the institutions of display constitute coexistent and intertwined forces determining, through self-regulation, the gap between individuals and institutions. The history of cultural institutions would be, then, the history of a specific relationship between audiences and display, as well as one having to do with the creation of vantage points from which to see the world and to see oneself seeing; they would be 'vantage points from which everyone could be seen, thus combining the functions of spectacle and surveillance' (62). From this passage from conservational and restrictive to exhibitional means, institutions would be ready to represent and exhibit 'society itself – in its constituent parts and as a whole' as a spectacle (62). Through the use of technologies of seeing, Bennett recalls a division between seeing and being seen full of colonial connotations:

And this power marked out the distinction between the subjects and the objects of power not within the national body but, as organized by the many rhetoric of imperialism, between that body and other, 'non-civilized' peoples upon whose bodies the effects of power were unleashed with as much force and theatricality as had been manifest on the scaffold. (64)

Power operates in two different ways for Bennett. First, as a matter of difference, there is a classical 'us/them' rhetoric. Second, and more important, power is exerted through the display of that difference by exhibitional means in certain spaces designated for that purpose. It has to do with images as much as with audiences and platforms. Power does not depend on the external will of an institution which commodifies and swallows otherness, but on the self-regulatory processes of an artistic community. A struggle for

visibility and representation within transnational scenarios has somehow reduced the weight that less visible, infrastructural practices emerging from ‘Southern’ scenarios have in configuring effective and enduring public spheres. Instead, many of these contemporary practices infused with a double concern for Institutional Critique and postcoloniality are condemned to respond to the ethnographic expectations of metropolitan museums and to deal with how the colonial museum (always identifiable, always located) classifies, inventories, categorises and displays otherness. The commodification of difference in discursive terms would be, then, symptomatic not only of the continuities of central epistemic and cultural inequalities within a supposedly postcolonial world, it would also be behind the epistemic and cultural divisions among subjects with institutional agency and subjects confined to representation. The next section analyses how this division operates.

Cultural confinements

Confronting this postcolonial exhibitionary complex implies, first of all, acknowledging how it has institutionalised a certain way of thinking, determining at the same time the locus of criticism in uneven ways. Holmes (2011: 83) argues that a sort of ‘cultural confinement’ still haunts the wide range of existing artistic practices, restricting their reach:

Cultural confinement does not just affect experimental art ... Instead it applies to all egalitarian, emancipatory and ecological aspirations in the post-Fordist period which now reveals itself to be a period of pure crisis management, one that has not produced any fundamental solutions to the problems of industrial modernisation, but has only exported them across the earth.

As can be seen here, recent debates on Institutional Critique fail to grasp the nature of institutionalism because they still operate under the specific urgency of crisis management. This is evident, for example, in strategies that attempt to occupy or decolonise consolidated, well-attended museums in major art centres. Praiseworthy as these attempts may be, they often forget that such acts are not always followed by a redefinition of the structure of institutionalism.¹⁶

The problem with the critical aspirations of *Disappearing Element* is then not that it fails to envision a worldly enough situation (through conflating transnational economic relations with an identification of the biennial forum as ‘everything that exists’) but, rather, that it dismisses the fact that the platform chosen for critique is just one among a panorama of coeval and appropriate settings. When that coevality is forgotten, criticality operates under the implicit acceptance of the hierarchy, determining the skilling and singularity of the artist as a portrayer of criticism no matter how participative the critical gesture is, how ‘profane’ its layout or how insistently routine its appearance. That acceptance dovetails with the recognition of art’s limited capacity to transform ‘the art world’ in its totality, which leads to small-scale interventions often measured more from their theoretical framework than from a close look at the effects and affects they move in practice.¹⁷

¹⁶The recent attempts to define a ‘Global Occupy Movement’ while keeping the centrality of the ‘original *événement*’ is highly symptomatic of those pitfalls.

¹⁷In a recent commentary on Boris Groys’s reading of art activism, Sholette (2016) points out how the assimilation of activism by artistic means implies a kind of resurrection of the more crippled and self-defeating version of institutional critique.

More than ever, in these contemporary times, criticising ‘the art world’ should imply operating within the uncomfortable but productive position delineated by the fractures of the many existing art worlds.¹⁸ From this position, it is easier to see how the contemporary itself was constructed by selectively privileging or erasing alternative genealogies of empowerment and constituency. At the same time, it determines a perfect position for transforming critique into action.

Conclusions: stop occupying institutions, occupy institutionalism

The intent of this article was to examine how provincialism and universalism can be related to Institutional Critique at a time when the debates about institutionalism are becoming more complicated and expansive. The currency of infrastructural and organisational practices nowadays has gone far beyond the original purposes and objectives of Institutional Critique, since the aspirations of this movement have been subsumed into a bigger set of social relations exceeding the boundaries of the art world. Despite the clairvoyance of some of the insights that point to a denser and more interwoven institutional fabric, thereby escaping the identification and fetishism of the museum and gallery as the object of criticism, current approaches to institutional practices are not comprehensive as far as location is concerned. Debates on institutionalism have remained attached to a particularly resilient constraint: conceiving institutionalism as a ‘located’ prerogative. No matter how ‘interiorised’ this institution is, how incorporated as a capturing ‘internal’ constraint, the successive ‘waves’ of Institutional Critique have faced a monolithic rival. Embodied as the market, the museum or a more complex, ubiquitous reality, the Institution (with a capital I) has remained a homogeneous force that seems to be deployed in a similar manner in any context. It is not unusual, then, that the list of projects and countries associated with Institutional Critique is very short.

The provincialism of the debates on institutionalism responds to a more complex distribution of power and meaning within contemporaneity. As this article has shown, the obstacles to envisaging institutional power outside of identifiable viewpoints are dependent on a process of commodifying ‘Southern’ artistic practices through their inclusion within display and exhibition-making. This, to emphatically reiterate, by no means implies a negative consideration of art exhibitions, nor an undervaluation of their significance as critical arenas. Exhibitions are places where art becomes public and they have been decisive in creating a worldly arena for artistic practices and debates. The main objective of this essay is not to criticise exhibitions or to privilege organisational over curatorial practices. Rather, I argue that the major transformation deriving from institutional and organisational practices nowadays is not a passing from the hegemony of the national institution to a ubiquitous and interiorised institutional power, but one based on institutional power as a *distributed* and confined entity which is produced out of the canonisation and location of the object and the place of criticism, and from the erosion of institutional and instituent genealogies. The opposition presented in this article appears in this light as the best example of how verticality survives *in the space of the divide*

¹⁸ I am indebted here of Terry Smith’s articulation of the idea of a ‘coeval commons’. Smith argued recently that the diversity of objectives, formats and forms makes it impossible to encompass all artistic manifestation into a single unity. See Smith (2016).

between the horizontality of networks and biennial-based itinerancies and the 'old' verticality of institutional power and privilege as we have always known them.

If critique is to be granted any transformative value in our time, two prerogatives must be fulfilled: affirmativeness (an interest in providing alternatives beyond the act of negatively criticising already existing institutions); and insertion of this active agency within historically located public spheres that are not subsumable under generic universal narratives, whether these are understood as capitalism, neoliberalism, flatness, world art, etc. Acting strategically while imagining institutionalism as a complex structure would be a good summary of that position. The forces of institutionalisation and de-institutionalisation are in themselves institutions. The institution of institutionalism intends to allude to the capacity to populate or depopulate certain contexts from organisational power, to unhinge their histories, their agencies, from institutional fixations, or to incardinate them to those. The uneven process of institutionalisation and de-institutionalisation of artistic contexts and the overlapping of modern, geopolitical divides with new worldly configurations of art and sense arises as the true object of critique, the point that has to be confronted if we are to restage the democratising potential and the claim for publicness once associated with Institutional Critique.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the feedback provided by Marcelo Expósito, Gerald Raunig, Christian Kravagna and Denisa Tomkova.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

This article has been funded by the Portuguese Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia under the grant SFRH/BDP/92492/2013.

Notes on contributor

Carlos Garrido Castellano is FCT Postdoctoral Researcher at the Centre for Comparative Studies of the University of Lisbon. His research focuses on Socially-Engaged Art, Curatorship and Postcolonial Theory. Currently he is the main researcher of the research project 'Comparing We's. Collectivism, Emancipation, Postcoloniality'. He has done extensive fieldwork research in the Caribbean area, the United States and Africa, and has collaborated with journals such as *Third Text*, *Social Identities*, *Travessia*, *Anthurium* or *Cultural Dynamics*. Now he is preparing a monograph on socially-engaged art and coloniality.

References

Alberro, Alexander. 2006. 'Cannibalism, the Non-Object, and Institutional Critique'. In John C. Welchman (ed), *Institutional Critique and After*. Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 301–304.

- Alberro, Alexander. 2009. 'Institutions, Critique, and Institutional Critique'. In Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (eds), *Institutional Critique. An Anthology of Artists' Writings*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2–20.
- Alberro, A. and Stimson, B. (ed). 2009. *Institutional Critique. An Anthology of Artists' Writings*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Bennett, Tony. 2005. 'The Exhibitionary Complex'. In Reesa Greenberg, Bruce Ferguson and Sandy Nairne (eds), *Thinking About Exhibitions*. London and New York: Routledge, 58–81.
- Bishop, Claire. 2004. 'The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents'. *Artforum* 44, 178–183.
- Bishop, Claire. 2006. 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics'. *October* 110, 51–79.
- Bishop, C. 2012. *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. London and New York: Verso.
- Brian-Wilson, Julia. 2003. 'A Curriculum for Institutional Critique, or the Professionalization of Conceptual Art'. In Jonas Ekeberg (ed), *New Institutionalism*. Oslo: Office of Contemporary Art, 89–109.
- Buchloh, Benjamin. 1990. 'Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions'. *October* 55, 105–143.
- Chakrabarty, D. 2000. *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Clifford, J. 1988. *The Predicament of Culture. Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Doro, G. 2011. *Fred Wilson: A Critical Reader*. London: Ridinghouse.
- Expósito, Marcelo. 2006. 'Inside and Outside the Art Institution: Self-Valorisation and Montage in Contemporary Art'. Available online at <http://eicp.net/transversal/0407/exposito/en> (accessed 22 November 2017)
- Filipovic, Elena. 2005. 'The Global White Cube'. In Barbara Vanderlinden and Elena Filipovic (eds), *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 63–84.
- Fraser, Andrea. 2005. 'From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique'. *Artforum* 44:1, 278–286.
- Green, Renee. 2000. 'Shadows and Signals: Quotes, Notes and a Letter'. In *Renee Green: Shadows and Signals*. Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 15–20.
- Green, Renee. 2006. 'Beyond'. In John C. Welchman (ed), *Institutional Critique and After*. Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 159–170.
- Green, R. 2014. *Other Planes Out There: Selected Writings*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Graw, I. 2005. (Coord) *Institutionskritik (59)*, Special Issue of *Texte zur Kunst* Journal. Available online at <https://www.textezurkunst.de/59/> (accessed 22 November 2017)
- Graw, Isabelle. 2006. 'Beyond Institutional Critique'. In John C. Welchman (ed), *Institutional Critique and After*. Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 137–152.
- Haacke, Hans. 2005. 'All the Art That's Fit to Show'. In John C. Welchman (ed), *Institutional Critique and After*. Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 53–56.
- Hodder, I. 2012. *Entangled. An Archaeology of the Relationships Between Humans and Things*. Malden and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Holmes, B. 2002. *Hieroglyphs of the Future: Art & Politics in a Networked Era*. Paris & Zagreb: Visual Culture NGO: What, How and for Whom.
- Holmes, Brian. 2011. 'Eventwork. The Fourfold Matrix of Contemporary Social Movements'. In Nato Thompson (ed), *Living as Form: Socially-Engaged Art From 1991–2011*. New York: Creative Time, 72–86.
- Kester, G. 2004. *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kester, G. 2011. *The One and the Many. Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Kester, Grant. 2013. 'The Device Laid Bare: On Some Limitations in Current Art Criticism'. *E-Flux* 50. Available online at <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/50/59990/the-device-laid-bare-on-some-limitations-in-current-art-criticism/> (accessed 22 November 2017)

- Kester, Grant. 2015. 'On the Relationship between Theory and Practice in Socially-Engaged Art'. Available online at <http://www.abladeofgrass.org/fertile-ground/on-the-relationship-between-theory-and-practice-in-socially-engaged-art/> (accessed 22 November 2017)
- Kouoh, K. (ed) 2013. *Condition Report: Symposium on Building Art Institutions in Africa*. Ostfindern: Hatje Kantz Verlag.
- Miller, John. 2005. 'The Show You Love to Hate: A Psychology of the Mega-Exhibition'. In Reesa Greenberg, Bruce Ferguson and Sandy Nairne (ed), *Thinking About Exhibitions*. London and New York: Routledge, 192–196.
- Nowotny, Stefan. 2009. 'Anti-Canonization: The Differential Knowledge of Institutional Critique'. In Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray (ed), *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice. Reinventing Institutional Critique*. London: MayFly, 21–29.
- Prashad, V. 2013. *The Poorer Nations: A Possible History of the Global South*. New York: The New Press.
- Purves, T. and Aslan Selzer, S. (ed) 2015. *What We Want Is Free: Critical Exchanges in Recent Art*. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Raunig, Gerald. 2007. 'Instituent Practices, No. 2. Institutional Critique, Constituent Power, and the Persistence of Instituting'. Available online at <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0507/raunig/en> (accessed 22 November 2017)
- Raunig, G. and Ray, G. (ed) 2009. *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique*. London: MayFlyBooks.
- Sheikh, Simon. 2006. 'Notes on Institutional Critique'. Available online: <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0106/sheikh/en> (accessed 22 November 2017)
- Sholette, Gregory. 2016. 'Merciless Aesthetic: Activist Art as the Return of Institutional Critique. A Response to Boris Groys'. *Field. A Journal of Socially-Engaged Art* 4. Available online at <http://field-journal.com/issue-4/merciless-aesthetic-activist-art-as-the-return-of-institutional-critique-a-response-to-boris-groys> (accessed 22 November 2017)
- Skrebowski, Luke. 2013. 'After Hans Haacke'. *Third Text* 27:1, 115–130.
- Smith, Terry. 1974. 'The Provincialism Problem'. *Artforum* 13:1, 54–59.
- Smith, T. 2012. *Thinking Contemporary Curating*. New York: Independent Curators International.
- Smith, T. 2016. *The Contemporary Composition*. Berlin: Sternberg Press.
- Steyerl, Hito. 2006. 'The Institution of Critique'. Available online at <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0106/steyerl/en> (accessed 22 November 2017)
- Steyerl, Hito. 2016. 'A Tank in a Pedestal'. *E-Flux* 70. Available online at <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/70/60543/a-tank-on-a-pedestal-museums-in-an-age-of-planetary-civil-war/> (accessed 22 November 2017)
- Stimson, Blake. 2010. 'Institutionality as Enlightenment'. In Pascal Gielen (ed), *Institutional Attitudes*. Amsterdam: Valiz, 141–167.
- Wright, Stephen. 2004. 'The Delicate Essence of Artistic Collaboration'. *Third Text* 18:6, 533–545.