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## **Mel Ramsden's Theoretical Critique of Institutions: A Close Reading of "On Practice"**

**Abstract:** The work offers a detailed reading of Mel Ramsden's "On Practice". The introductory paragraphs bring insight into contemporary discussions concerning definitions of the term "institutional critique" and exhibit different approaches to the historization of these practices. The main thesis is that Marxism was present in the critical practices of the New York-based conceptual artists associated with institutional critique, while the expanded thesis is that their Marxism was a form of interpretation/intervention in the institution of art. The central part comprises a reading of Ramsden's text. The reading divides the text into three segments: a critique of bureaucracy in art, a critique of the art market, and a call for alternatives. Special attention is paid to the third segment. The communal art alternatives that Ramsden proposes are juxtaposed with the concrete practices of the "social turn" in contemporary art. The final remarks offer conclusions regarding the main and expanded theses and raise the question of the type of intervention that Ramsden's text performs in the contemporary institution of art.

**Key words:** institutional critique, artist theory, Marxism, critical theory

### **Introduction: Contextualizing Institutional Critique in the West**

#### **Discussing the Term "Institutional Critique"**

The term *institutional critique* signifies an art movement that originated in the late 1960s and early 1970s. A common denominator of these heterogeneous artistic practices is their conflictual approach to the relationship between the institution of art and the artist as its actor.

The relevant literature offers a periodization of this movement.<sup>1</sup> With ongoing polemics there is a global recognition of three generational waves of institutional critique: the first wave (from the late 1960s to the late 1970s); the second wave (the 1980s and '90s); and the third wave (since the early 2000s). The first wave, which forms the focus of this paper, is recognized in the work of artists and theorists such as Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke, Victor Burgin, Joseph Kosuth, Michael Asher, Robert Smithson, Dan Graham, Martha Rosler, Mel Ramsden, Ian Burn, and associated groups such as *Art & Language*, *Art Workers Coalition* (AWC), *Guerilla Art Action Group* (GAAG), *Group Material*, and others.<sup>2</sup> Most of the artists in this list are better known for their contributions to postminimal and conceptual art. This is why institutional critique should be thought of as an assemblage of diverse artistic practices critiquing institutions with a certain coherence and historical duration, rather than as a unitary art movement. The tentative nature of this term is evident in the general inability of contemporary authors to locate and determine the exact text(s) where the phrase “institutional critique” was first established as a theoretical term. The American artist Andrea Fraser pointed to this fact in 2005. She begins her essay by asking whether she’s personally responsible for introducing this term, which she finds to be a reduction of complex processes of artistic critique to a mere marketing phrase.<sup>3</sup> Gerald Raunig criticized Fraser for this claim two years later. He finds her starting point, a generational periodization, to be problematic as such. In his view, it is imprecise and biased because it puts the younger generations (Fraser is regarded as a leading member of the second wave) in a position of power from which they can claim that the work of earlier institutional critique is constituted through their own work.<sup>4</sup> Without further analyzing Raunig’s critique, this example is a good illustration of how much importance contemporary actors attach to setting up a theoretical and historical framework of institutional critique. It seems that Benjamin Buchloh’s assumptions on the historization of conceptual art were correct. He argues that this historization is always tied to the questions of method and the “interest” of the researcher himself/herself.<sup>5</sup> According to Buchloh, institutional critique was first manifested in the work of Haacke, Broodthaers, and Buren. He argues that they were the first artists to translate latent tendencies of institutional critique, in the work of Lawrence Weiner and Robert Barry, into open forms of critique. Even though Buchloh’s reading offers precise genealogies of individual artistic practices, his text lacks a comparative genealogy in an American context. Charles Harrison and Paul J. Wood interpret its origin from analytical conceptualism. They claim that the linguistic analysis of an art object was a direct precursor of the analysis of traditional aesthetic terminology and then of the socio-political contexts in which a certain art develops.<sup>6</sup> These are just a few relevant starting points for a thorough

<sup>1</sup> Julia Bryan-Wilson, “A Curriculum for Institutional Critique, or The Professionalization of Conceptual Art”, in: Jonas Ekerberg (ed.), *New Institutionalism*, Oslo: Verksted #1, Office for Contemporary Art Norway, 2003, 89–109; Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray (eds.), *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique*, London, MayFly, 2007; Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (eds.), *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists Writings*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Due to the limited format of this paper, I included only actors from Western Europe and the USA.

<sup>3</sup> Andrea Fraser, “From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique”, *Artforum*, 2005, Vol. XLIV, Issue 1, 278–286.

<sup>4</sup> Gerald Raunig, “Instituent Practices: Fleeing, Instituting, Transforming”, in: Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray (eds.), op. cit. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions”, *October*, 1990, Vol. LV, 105–143.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Harrison and Paul J. Wood (eds.), “Part VII: Institutions and Objections: Introduction”, *Art in Theory, 1900–1990*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1992, 797–802.

examination of the origin of institutional critique. What can be said with certainty is that the movement originated from certain tendencies in post-minimal art, analytical conceptualism, and influences from analytical philosophy and the New Left's humanist Marxism.

These differing aspects of the movement's history and related theory open room for numerous approaches to a particular set of problems a researcher might pursue. My intention here is to examine the theory of an artist who problematized the market function of art from a leftist position. I intend to produce a close reading of Mel Ramsden's text "On Practice" from *The Fox* magazine.<sup>7</sup> Through this reading I want to test the hypothesis of the presence of Marxism in the theories of artists associated with institutional critique. However, based on the assumption that New York's intellectual circles were already exposed to the theories of Herbert Marcuse, Western Maoism, and Anarchism, this hypothesis must be expanded.

A recent text by Alpar Losoncz seems helpful in this regard. He claims that Marxism can only be a "mobile non-term, one truly dispersed and centerless term." According to Losoncz, there is no "essence" in Marxism, but merely a Badiouian engaging in the "processual discovering of the truth". Marx's texts are no coherent whole but only "fragments, ruins, remains of Marx's incursions, dilemmas, retreats and ruptures".<sup>8</sup> To be "faithful to Marxism" doesn't mean being blindly loyal to the original texts and their various meanings to different factions. On the contrary, it means that one must always keep reinterpreting the original texts and use these interpretations for intervening in other fields. It is in this context that one should understand Losoncz's thesis that "every interpretative act is at once an intervention". This approach helps shift the focus of the enquiry into Mel Ramsden's Marxism from a matter of sheer presence to a matter of type. The question I will attempt to answer is what type of Marxist intervention Ramsden performed in the institution of art.

## Mel Ramsden: "On Practice"

### The Title

The title of Ramsden's text was not haphazardly chosen. It was a conscious appropriation of the same title, "On Practice", of a well-known 1937 text by Mao Zedong. That said, it is important to note that Ramsden's text cannot be called Maoist, at least not in any vulgar way. He ensured this when he dissociated himself from the academic as well as popular Western Maoism of the 1960s. However, he states that even though he does not see himself as an advocate of the Maoist or Leninist "uniform proletarian societies of the future", there is a lot of the indispensable political practice of transforming concepts into realities in the words of these two revolutionary actors.<sup>9</sup> This anti-dogmatic-yet-revolutionary approach helps the reader to gain some insight into the practice-oriented social critique that Ramsden tried to produce in his writing. This tendency is clearly developed in the text's three main themes: 1) the critique of bureaucracy in art; 2) the critique of the art market, and 3) the call for alternatives to the present order.

<sup>7</sup> Mel Ramsden, "On Practice", in: Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (eds.), op. cit. 170–199.

<sup>8</sup> Alpar Losoncz, "How Time Caught up with Marx?", *Thing: Journal for Theoretical Practices*, 2013, No. 5, 46.

<sup>9</sup> Mel Ramsden, "On Practice", op. cit. 194.

## The Critique of Bureaucracy in Art

Ramsden's critique of bureaucracy is most explicit in theses 5, 6, 7, and 13, and partly in theses 10 and 12. Ramsden proposes thinking about bureaucracy not as a massive centralized organization, but as a personification of impersonal processualities inherent to capitalism. The key feature of this conception of bureaucracy in the art world is the powerlessness of its inhabitants to make crucial choices about the development of their own institution. These decisions are "made" through the impersonal functioning of market institutions (commercial galleries) and via private administrative control (magazines like *Artforum* and the MoMA). Therefore, the label "bureaucrat" may only be applied to those individuals who play their systemically assigned roles in an obedient and unconscious fashion. The bourgeois art critic is such a bureaucrat. His basic functions in this system are assessing and grading. Ramsden interprets these operations as, on the one hand, part of the general commodification of people and language in capitalism, and, on the other hand, as ideological operations that aim to naturalize existing class (and other) relations in order to maintain the status quo in a given society.<sup>10</sup>

The one ideology that every modernist bourgeois critic must advocate is formalism. This dominant theory of art, especially in New York at the time, had the function of perpetuating the general public's belief about the progress of art as an exclusively morphological evolution of the "product". Ramsden sees this conception as flawed and offers the reader a classical Marxist interpretation. For him, the development of art is a dialectical process in which the products of art change simultaneously with the modes of production. By avoiding this link between the mode of production and art, formalism produces an ideological cover for the real relations of production that are largely determined by the ownership of the means of production.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, Ramsden finds the critique of formalism a much more challenging affair than ridiculing the concepts of Clement Greenberg. He argues that one can find a thorough and meaningful critique of these issues only in those voices that attack the concept of "Official Culture" and the imperialist effects it has in the international context. In his view, official culture is determined by a specialization of cultural and artistic activities that came about with the forming of modern institutions in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The rise of the specialists (professional artists, aestheticians, and critics) led to the formation of the traditional relation of active cultural producers on the one end and passive audiences on the other. He sees this specialization as a form of concentration of power and influence in the hands of a bureaucratic minority that, by rule of thumb, serves the interests of the ruling class. Ramsden then says that this influential social formation advocates a consumerist approach to culture. Artists no longer produce for their immediate communities but for the world of market middlemen, critics, and curators (the so called "bureaucratic middle-life") whose respective goal is to inaugurate their artist clientele into the canon of art history. The product of their artistic work is therefore alienated from the artist in a similar way as the products of labour are alienated from the working class. Ramsden's usage of the concept of alienation in his text is the place where his critique of bureaucracy joins the critique of the art market.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 177–178.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 181–183.

## The Critique of the Art Market

Ramsden interprets the art market from the perspective of an artist's approach to Marx's value theory. It teems with observations and theoretical interpretations of the specificities of capitalist exploitation in the institution of art. This is most clearly seen in theses 1–3 and 8–10. Here, the market is not just some imaginary stock exchange where commodities receive a price and switch owners, but also an array of value relations that are internalized by the very actors of the art world. Therefore, any critique of the alienation and commodification of art must start from the critic's self-analysis of his or her own position in the system of value relations.<sup>12</sup> In this view, the middlemen and their formalism go hand in hand with the compartmentalization (fragmenting and specialization) of human labour in a capitalist society. Under the assumption that a communist society will abolish the alienation of the worker from his products, Ramsden imagines a future art production that will not be alienated from the artist and his/her community. It is thus clear that his vision of an unalienated art is one that has surpassed all forms of capitalist generation of value and has *returned* to its immediate social community. A thesis that dominates the text is that community is the only place where art can function in a constructive social mode, as opposed to the destructive market mode whereby it currently operates. Ramsden is nonetheless aware that the current capitalist-bureaucratic order is sovereign and that there is no position outside of it. The most he can do is call for a discussion of possible alternatives.

## The Call for Alternatives to the Present Order

Suggestions of alternatives and critiques of existing critical practices are present in almost every thesis in the text. Therefore I will only present a few theses that resonate with our contemporary issues in art and politics. In numerous places in the text Ramsden says that the aim of an alternative to the described capitalist-bureaucratic order would be a radical break with the existing practices and not just a diversification of the social status quo. He cannot be rightly accused of underestimating the complexity of this task or the forces opposing such a radical change. In several places he says that bureaucracy can function and dominate the public sphere without any contact with the real dynamic of the contemporary scene. This is followed by the assertion that artistic practices cannot significantly change, say, the current art world mass media system, let alone capitalism as a mode of production. He concludes that thorough systemic change cannot come about without using political power.<sup>13</sup> This line of thinking arises from the fact that he sees these problems as far more political than aesthetical. Ramsden's key proposal is to "turn" away from administrative official culture – away from its alienation of art and its language of market-oriented grading, away from turning culture into a source of power over others – and toward more social, dialogical communal practices.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> As a whole, the text features numerous segments of self-analysis and self-critique. Time and again, Ramsden asks himself about the contradictions of his own critical position. He does not negate his own class identity. On the contrary, he positions himself clearly as part of the bourgeoisie and states that he earns his living from the art market. He also claims to enjoy being a consumer, a position which vulgar Marxism might call opportunistic. Ibid, 178–179.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 190.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 187.

Instead of the bureaucratic question: “What is art?”, Ramsden proposes a dialogical model: “I have this concept of art, how does my concept match yours?”. He wants to transfigure the universalist standards of artistic quality that operate at the centre of the capitalist system into a social dialogue of a specific community. In this strategy, art is not a definition that resides outside of dialogue but a “social matter embedded in (our) conversation”.<sup>15</sup> The importance of this dialogue, like the importance of the community in the criticism of the art market, lies in the fact that it tends to establish new relations in the institution of art by way of acting in a role that is not determined by an economic-legal contract. He concludes that without these kinds of changes in sociality there can be no alternatives to the existing order.

### A Brief Comment on Relevant Community Art Practices

In this reading I have sought to verify my initial thesis about the presence of Marxism in Ramsden’s text. Without a doubt, Ramsden knew and applied the principal Marxist concepts (value, commodity, alienation, etc.) in his analysis of the contemporary New York art scene. My expanded hypothesis will require a more complex approach. If one tries to comprehend the character of Ramsden’s interpretation/intervention by means of Marxism, it’s clear that he attempted to intervene in the institution of art via a critical text with the intention of leaving it radically unsettled and, in a future prospect, radically altered. He attempts to do this by awakening the public, the artist, and the middleman to the function of bureaucracy in the reproduction of the relations of production in capitalism. Their new awareness should simultaneously help bring about the change of artistic practices from their existing forms to the unalienated and egalitarian forms of tomorrow. However, it must be kept in mind that his actual audience was a small circle on New York’s conceptual art scene while in his text he dealt with issues that concerned the art public at large. There is a discrepancy here, one that raises the question of what the reaction of the public would have been, not just to his writing, but to an implementation of such alternatives. What kind of problems would such an initiative face in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century?

I chose to consult Claire Bishop’s memorable 2012 book, *Artificial Hells*, to find possible answers and different ways of thinking about these questions. Even though Bishop did not write about the activities of Mel Ramsden and *Art & Language*, her insights into UK community art practices offer a point of comparison with Ramsden’s proposals. Before tackling this issue, I want to note that this branching off from the main topic is not an attempt at a comparative analysis of the presence of Marxism in community art and institutional critique. I am merely trying to perform a minor excursus that may offer a fresh perspective on Ramsden’s call for alternatives.

Claire Bishop says that collectives such as *The Blackie* and *InterAction*, both founded in the UK the late 1960s, have worked directly with various impoverished and marginalized communities. They have long histories of realizing exhibitions and events in which these communities participated in the production of art, as well as in playing games and attending educational programmes.<sup>16</sup> Bishop identifies two major issues in leading a community art organization from a supposedly radical political platform. The first issue is financing. *The Blackie* and

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<sup>15</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>16</sup> Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London, Verso, 2012, 179–189.

*InterAction* initially solved this problem by means of government subsidies, but had to find other sources due to the neoliberal assault on the welfare state. It's worth noting that those two are the only such organizations that survived the rise of Thatcherism and its consequences for the public funding of art. The second issue is the problem of these groups' theoretical and ideological differentiation from the matrix of philanthropic organizations and government social services. This troubled *The Blackie* and *InterAction* from their very establishment. Their lack of ability to construct a long-term strategy for enacting social change became increasingly evident as the initial countercultural wave of the 1960s (which brought them about) started to disintegrate in the following decade. This issue is also closely related to the neglect of aesthetic criteria through which they could have addressed a "secondary audience". They had "no discursive framing or an elaborated culture of reception to facilitate comparison and analysis with similar projects, because community art is not produced with such a critical audience in mind".<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, in Bishop's view, contemporary art at the time was no stranger to countercultural, participatory approaches to art. My own research of institutional critique and contemporary art supports her finding. However, she concludes that even when contemporary art operated in a local context, it managed to posit itself as relevant to a large audience through a detailed conceptualization of art practice tropes such as authorship, materials, location, and the final result. This freedom to direct works individually is what constitutes the *differentia specifica* between contemporary and community arts as they appeared during the final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

These findings benefit my analysis in two ways. First, they show concrete issues that arise in realization, such as the financing and long-term sustainability of community art projects. Second, they show that Ramsden's choice to tie his work, however loosely, to a global emancipatory project found in Marxism(s) provided him with a broad theoretical horizon whereby capitalism could be theorized as a totality. Ramsden's theses display an awareness of the fact that engaging issues in critical/alternative art within a capitalist mode of production requires a simultaneous effort in both theoretical practice and radical politics. In this context, the two UK organizations discussed above appear to have lacked exactly these kinds of insights in their theories and practices.

## Conclusion

Ramsden's text can be seen as the opening piece of a chapter in an anti-capitalist art history. Its precise remarks and conclusions echo loudly in post-2008 art world. Even though one must note the apparent changes in the practices of the bureaucracy and the art market since 1975, the call for alternatives is still highly relevant. By comparing the realized practices of British community art organizations and the discourse of a representative of the elite coterie of conceptual art, it becomes clear that the call for alternatives in "On Practice" is no more than a draft, albeit a potent one. Its potential lies in its attempt to outline a possible theoretical framework in which a radical community art could ground its practices. Nevertheless, this effort is tarnished by falling short of acknowledging the harsh problems the founding and upkeep of such projects could entail.

At the time, Marxism(s) obviously played an important role in shaping the criticality of Ramsden's text. The teleological idea of investing one's work in a global emancipatory social

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 190.

project, as well as the constant need to rearticulate it, are among the key features of this transfer. The community art organizations discussed above seem to have fallen short of their various political goals due to their failure to frame their practices in terms of institutional critique in a capitalist mode of production. This is especially true in cases where these initiatives were theoretically and ideologically indistinguishable from government social services. However, in this theoretical-political reduction I performed above, one must not overlook the fact that their politically unprolific approaches might have just as well empowered them in other fields.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The games or month-long performances organized by *The Blackie* and *InterAction* bring forth specific realities and modes of theorization that one should not overlook. Ibid, 179–189.