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Failure, Revolution and Institutional Critique

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In recent debates, the 'avant-garde' has been proposed once again as a useful concept through which to understand the significance of current developments in art (Léger 2012; Roberts 2015). John Roberts's book *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-garde* (2015) includes the criticism that art history tends to reduce the avant-garde to movements, narrated in terms of 'their rise, their fall, their failure and supercession' (Roberts 2015: 14). This kind of narration, according to Roberts, results in 'a strange, morally tinged discourse of avantgarde failure' (Roberts 2015: 14). It is this focus upon the relationship between the avant-garde and failure that I will extend in this article into discussion of another key term in the politics of contemporary art: institutional critique. 'Institutional critique' and 'avant-garde' have in common their tendency to fall in and out of favour as concepts through which to understand the politics of art. The key difference between them, however, is their historical inheritance. The debates about the artistic avant-garde are far too complex to be recounted here, but there is consensus that dates the term to the revolutions of the nineteenth century. Sometimes the historical frame is stretched as far as Romanticism, when it is viewed as the key inheritor of the energies released by the bourgeois revolution of 1789. Sometimes, the key date is 1917, invoking the artistic avant-gardes that sought to ally themselves to proletarian revolution. The emergence of 'institutional critique' is anchored to more recent times, in particular to the anti-institutional and counter-cultural currents of the 1960s (Stimson 2009). The standard narrative locates the origin of this practice among the interventions in the museum and gallery undertaken by Hans Haacke, Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren and Michael Asher (Fraser 1985, 2013, 2005). As we shall see, this 'first generation' is a retrospective invention of art criticism. Nonetheless, it has formed the scope of the term institutional critique, which is most often glossed as a self-reflexive investigation by artists of the economic determinations and social conventions that govern art's production, reception and distribution.

Unlike the avant-garde, institutional critique it is not usually connected to the history of revolution. In fact, it is most often proposed as the moment of critical recognition of the naivety of the revolutionary ambitions that informed the artistic avant-garde, with origins linked to the failure of aspirations of 1968, to the dominance of

spectacle and to other such ideas. Andrea Fraser, a key artist-critic working in this area, advances this argument succinctly:

The insistence of Institutional Critique on the inescapability of institutional determination may, in fact, be what distinguishes it most precisely from other legacies of the historical avant-garde. It may be unique among those legacies in its recognition of the failure of avantgarde movements and the consequences of that failure; that is, not the destruction of the institution of art, but its explosion beyond the traditional boundaries of specifically artistic objects and aesthetic criteria.

(Fraser 2005: 104)

In Fraser's account, the failure of the avant-garde leads to the 'explosion', or expansion of the art institution beyond its traditional boundaries. This explanation of avant-garde failure is derived from Peter Bürger, whose *Theory of the Avant-Garde* has, of course, been a key influence both on debates about the avant-garde and institutional critique (Bürger 1984). In *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde* (2015), Roberts gives over a good deal of space to undermining Bürger's analysis of the revolutionary avant-garde of the 1920s. Like Bürger, Roberts believes that the 1920s saw the most important manifestation of avant-gardism, because the experiments of that decade registered the cultural aftershocks of the Russian revolution. However, Roberts rejects Bürger's claim that the emancipatory project of the avant-garde is now 'historical', incapable of being repeated except as parody or pastiche. The avant-garde, for Roberts, is precisely a form of artistic production that resists being assigned a 'punctual' meaning; it is, instead, a location where 'revolutionary futures past' inform the present, and 'revolutionary time' is affirmed in its essential difference from calendrical time. Roberts does not claim, of course, that the continuation of the avant-garde 'research project' is entirely free from social or historical determination: he speaks of a 'suspensive avant-garde' that is continually reinventing the emancipatory promise of the avant-garde under different socio-cultural conditions and within the limits imposed by capitalist sociality. In this essay, I will focus on the sense in which art history is dislocated by Roberts's argument, or at least is identified as a space where the temporality of the avant-garde tends to be disciplined, because, as Roberts puts it, 'the named entity, the avant-garde, is quite different from the unnamed possibilities of its research programme' (Roberts 2015: 14).

This article will argue that institutional critique can also be separated from the name it has been assigned. In order to demonstrate this point, it will be necessary to explore the modalities of avant-garde failure: the failures ascribed to the avant-garde by accounts of institutional critique advanced by Andrea Fraser, indicated above, but also the

failure that is supposedly the consequence of avant-garde engagement with revolutionary politics. Although the discipline of art history is made problematic in Roberts's account, the case will be developed by exploring a specific art-historical example: the journal *The Fox*, which was published by the art collective Art & Language, New York (A&LNY), for three issues between 1975 and 1976. This moment is often seen as a marker of the 'end' of conceptual art because it resulted in an acrimonious split in Art & Language (Harrison 2001; Stimson 1999; Wall 2007b). Indeed, *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-garde* tends to represent the period of *The Fox* in this light (Roberts 2015). However, *The Fox* provides an opportunity to explore the question of art-critical and art-historical engagement with the avant-garde, because it raises questions about the representation of failure. Conveniently, it was in the pages of *The Fox* that the phrase 'institutional critique' was first used in print (Alberro 2009).

FAILURE AND PRAXIS: A&LNY, 1975–1976

Art & Language was a conceptual art collective established in Coventry in the late 1960s, by four founding members: Terry Atkinson, Michael Baldwin, Howard Hurrell and David Bainbridge. By the early 1970s, the group had a wing based in New York. This wing, which became known as Art & Language, New York (A&LNY) began in piecemeal fashion, because the founders became identified as a group through their separate involvement with the UK wing of the organization. Joseph Kosuth became the 'American Editor' of the journal *Art-Language* for its second issue. The New York-based collaboration between Mel Ramsden and Ian Burn, which had been named the 'Society for Theoretical Art and Analyses' in 1969, formally assimilated itself to Art & Language in 1971 (Harrison and Orton 1982). By the mid-1970s, however, the membership of A&LNY had grown considerably, with around sixteen artists and art historians involved at the peak of its membership (Corris 1999).¹ At this time, Art & Language's art practice took the form of a theoretical dialogue existing between its members. The dialogue began in and around the journal *Art-Language*, although the group also exhibited their work as 'indexes', installations where essays or fragments of text were compiled and mapped to show possible relationships of meaning between them. The first index was included in 'Documenta 5' in 1972, and it is from this point that Art

¹ The membership of A&LNY in 1976 included Mel Ramsden, Paula Ramsden, Ian Burn, Joseph Kosuth, Sarah Charlesworth, Michael Corris, Andrew Menard, Preston Heller, Jill Breakstone, Carole Condé, Karl Beveridge, Nigel Lendon, Terry Smith, Christine Kozlov, Mayo Thompson, and Kathryn Bigelow.

& Language began to be explored as an art practice created 'in common' (Harrison 2001: 68). Their dialogic approach to making art has a number of important implications. In the words of Charles Harrison, it tended to 'dramatize the social nature of thinking and to render marginal or irrelevant the more mystifying conventions of the individuality of thinking' (Harrison 2001: 68). It also implied a 'learning situation' in which the terms at issue needed to be rigorously translated between and among the perspectives represented by different members of the group. The practice traversed the boundaries between artwork, art criticism and philosophy. Finally, the dialogic process could be understood as practice in which 'failure' played a self-conscious role.

In 'Draft for an anti-textbook', a transcript of conversations between Mel Ramsden, Ian Burn and Terry Smith of A&LNY published in 1974 in *Art-Language*, a strategy of failure is made explicit. Failure is proposed as a means by which it might be possible to break down an existing paradigm of thought, in order to achieve a new perspective, one that has political implications:

Rationality is the ideology of the status quo [...] we feel uncomfortable with things that 'don't fit', that's the way things are set up and that is astonishing – what I am talking about is that a shift to doing things that (willfully) don't fit is not a prelude to getting better fits, but a kind of heuristic for being self-conscious [...] it's where we take seriously the notion of failures – A&L as a 'history of failures' [...] if professionalism is knowing how to succeed then forget about it.

(Burn et al. 1974: 21)

This position on 'failure' seems to be an interpretation of the extreme emphasis on process in Art & Language – their theoretical dialogue refused closure, or any explicit goal save the interrogation of presuppositions and analysis of the interpretations and translations of the dialogue made by contributors to it. This practice, which increasingly came to include transcriptions of recorded conversations, did not aim at resolution, although it could be mapped: translated between visual and conceptual frames of reference in the various indexing projects of the early 1970s. Although the theoretical enquiry had begun as an interrogation of the claims that surrounded Modernist art theory, by the mid-1970s the political implications of the project had come to the fore. The move towards an idea of 'praxis' after 1974 is described in *Art & Language Australia 1975*:

'Theory-trying' and 'intersubjectivity' continue [...] but exploring the pragmatics of your language-use rubs your nose in the 'real world' contextuality of it. You want to be able to cash in your research, upfront its cultural embeddedness; you want to be able to act in specific situations. Your having of community encounters the cultural compartmentalization all around you, in you.

(Art & Language in Smith 1975: 19)

The precise nature of the 'cashing in' of political implications was subject to intense controversy in the pages of *The Fox* and *Art-Language* in 1975 and 1976. While Art & Language, UK (A&LUK) insisted that their practice might be affiliated to political struggle but remain art, A&LNY pursued a strategy that tended to conflate art and political militancy. A work undertaken in New York during the period of *The Fox*, under the moniker Music-Language (a collaboration between Art & Language and the musician Mayo Thompson of the band The Red Krayola), illustrates how the group developed this strategy of failure. The performance, created and videotaped at the John Weber gallery, was called *Nine Gross and Conspicuous Errors*.² It consisted of nine 'songs' written by Mel Ramsden, performed by the members of the group, and accompanied by the improvised guitar and drums of Mayo Thompson and Jesse Chamberlain. The 'lyrics' express a form of Marxist militancy, sung in a variety of amateurish ways. In one of the songs, for example, the camera lurches towards Ramsden, who gesticulates like an evangelical preacher, accompanied at the microphone by Ian Burn's chirpy whistling. Ramsden intones,

[...] transfixed by the law of contradiction, P or not P, you *or* me not you and me, can be struggled against by first seeing mind-self as a social institution and historic process, component of historic reality [...] not on the G and C E of aggrandizing and individuating self but of developing significant organizational forms.

(Music-Language 1975)

At another point, Terry Smith, Nigel Lendon and Ramsden sing a round accompanied by manic Hammond organ and laconic drumming. Ramsden claps enthusiastically and all three bob to the rhythm:

We must ferociously attack so called institutionalized egalitarianism (egalitarianism – egalitarianism!) It is a liberal smokescreen [...] which attempts to replace activist content (activist content!) with liberal structure [...] (structure [...] structure [...] structure) we must ferociously attack our social base here in New York [...] it is deeply-rooted deformed by self-images and corresponding temptations of public-relations life.

(Music-Language 1975)

² This had been conceived as a kind of 'going-on' from the album *Corrected Slogans* (1975), a collaboration between Mayo Thompson and Michael Baldwin, which had extended conceptual art practice as songs. *Corrected Slogans*, while it dealt with political themes, maintained an ironic distance from conventional political rhetoric. The politics was conceived as a potentiality in the work, to be approached experimentally through the displacement of conceptual art into slogans, and songs.

The performances are ridiculous, inept, even light-hearted. The lyrics emphasize the reification of individuality under capitalism, and the concomitant foreclosure of meaningful forms of collective action. The haphazard delivery was not intended to undermine this message, but to anticipate and display a problem: that the critique was made from within the sanctuary of art. The songs are 'errors' but they are also trying to avoid the errors enforced by art's usual decorum. Ramsden, in discussing the performance, has explained his attitude to it in this way:

I meant everything and was absolutely literal-minded about the 'lyrics'. In performance they were supposed to be 'errors' – something not made correctly. [...] The fact that the performances were absurd – if that's the word – and exposed these performers to sniggering and embarrassment was the point. How the lyrics and meaning of the lyrics fared under this exposure was also the point.

(Ramsden 2014: n.p.)

The meaning of these errors is connected to the group's identification with revolutionary Marxism. The performance was intended, in part, to point to subjectively internalised barriers to participation in a revolutionary process, but also satirically to attack the ideological function of art from a revolutionary perspective. This was sometimes understood at the time as an attempt to interrupt a subjective involvement in 'art bureaucracy'. Bureaucracy and 'artistic freedom', Ramsden suggests, are interconnected in a space where 'the ruling market forms the standard of intelligibility' (1975a: 66). Freedom is, in fact, an internalized alienation: 'the market isn't just contingently there [...] we don't just create freely and then afterwards get bulldozed by the market [...] we now practice with the market in mind (and I'm not loftily excepting my own writing here)' (Ramsden 1975a: 67).

A&LNY saw the collective dimension of their dialogic art practice as a means of resisting 'bureaucracy'. The opening editorial of *The Fox* invited contributions as a means of establishing a 'community' and 're-valuation of ideology' (A&LNY 1975a: n.p.). This trajectory quickly began to highlight different interpretations of the political tasks and different notions of community. By the second issue, the editorial emphasis was more militant, focused on the contestation of 'domination' and 'reclamation of art as an instrument of social and cultural transformation' (A&LNY 1975b: n.p.). The transition reflected differences among the editorial collective around the politics of the journal, which tended to be expressed as a conflict between two groupings: Sarah Charlesworth and her partner Joseph Kosuth on one side, and the rest of Art & Language on the other (Harrison and Orton 1982). While Kosuth and Charlesworth wanted to retain a flexible identification with the group, allowing Kosuth to continue

his separate identity as an artist, other members were pushing for more formal collective organization that would express commitment to militant revolutionary politics (Benchley 1976).

In one sense, the artistic politics of this moment was merely an expression of the combination of the New Left romanticism and western Maoism, which was characteristic of the politically militant fraction of 1970s counterculture. Indeed, this problem was recognized by the group in the debates between A&L_{UK} and A&L_{NY}, in *The Fox*, which often hinged on an attempt to move beyond the confines of the New Left, and to establish a more meaningful relationship to class politics (Burn 1975). Although the political militancy of the group may have been hyperbolic, it is also necessary to recognise that hyperbole is a common caricature of revolutionary militancy; it is often disavowed in these terms in retrospect, even by its former proponents. Commitment to revolution is subjectively and intersubjectively chaotic because it must be prevented from disintegration into the quotidian experience of capitalist sociality. The commitment to rigorously examine artists' 'internalized alienation' maintained the loyalty to revolutionary politics and provided their debates with their characteristic intensity and focus, but it also forced the group to a point of crisis.

After three issues, the final phase of *The Fox* began with the ejection of Joseph Kosuth and Sarah Charlesworth from Art & Language. During a series of meetings in March and April 1976 a number of 'points of unity' were advanced, which included an initial commitment to sharing all of the income from artistic activities. Kosuth and Charlesworth refused these provisions. The transcripts of these meetings were published as 'The Lumpen-headache' in *Fox* 3 with pseudonyms concealing the identities of participants at the request of Kosuth and Charlesworth. Contributors were given the names of tropical fish. At the last minute, Ramsden included a 'Dramatis Personae' that revealed identities, which was fixed into around a thousand copies of the issue (Gilbert 2004). For a few months the New York wing of Art & Language continued, before another split took place. From 1977, Art & Language continued as a collaboration between Mel Ramsden, who had relocated to England, and Michael Baldwin. Other members of A&L_{NY} briefly worked on a publication called *Red Herring* before going their separate ways.

The failure of A&L_{NY} was clearly traumatic for those involved; it was not a successful 'experiment' but a terminus that exceeded the self-conscious use of failure as a strategy. Of course, where a strategy of failure is preconceived and executed, it is not quite a strategy of failure. The ironies that breed around this idea are well

documented and have been widely invoked by artists since the 1960s (Le Feuvre 2010). For A&LNY, 'failure' opened out into consideration of a subjective relationship of members of the group to learning as political self-transformation, and to a revolutionary process. As it turned out, it was not possible to sustain this unstable position at the limit of art. However, the rich and antagonistic debates around *The Fox* contain important points of reference for any examination of the 'avant-garde' and its relationship to art critical representation. In order to explain how this is so, it will be necessary first to frame failure in terms of wider art-critical and art-historical debates.

The Narration of avant-garde failure (and the failure of Narration)

Failure is, undoubtedly, the most important motif in critical and art-historical accounts of the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde. It is, nonetheless, under-examined as a limit to avant-garde artists' engagement with politics, as Roberts argues (Roberts 2015). Peter Bürger gives a foundational account of avant-garde failure in *Theory of the Avant-garde* (1984). In this famous work, artistic success is a sign of the failure of art's revolutionary project. The historical avant-garde aspired to transgress the sanctuary of art, and to explode the 'promesse de bonheur' of art in the midst of life praxis. The eventual inclusion of Dada, Surrealism and Constructivism in the canon of twentieth-century art, and their powerful influence on commodity aesthetics, marks the absorption of a revolutionary project into the protean and cynical consensus of bourgeois culture (Bürger 1984).

In another sense, the failure of the avant-gardes to overcome the gap between art and life praxis resulted in a revolution *internal* to the art institution:

After Duchamp, not only can the everyday artefact claim the status of an artwork but the discourse of the institution is moulded by the avantgardes to a degree that no one could have predicted. Avant-garde categories such as rupture and shock gain admittance to the discourse of art, while at the same time concepts such as harmony and coherence are suspected of conveying a false appearance and a reconciliation with a degraded status quo.

(Bürger 2010: 705)

In Bürger's work, failure and success are drawn together, in this way, into what has become a Gordian knot for subsequent attempts to think the avant-garde. Critical champions of experimental art since the 1960s, the neo

avant-garde, have tended to accuse Bürger of melancholy because he rules out the possibility of revolutionary transformations within the art institution after the insurrection of the 1920s. Bürger's critics, nonetheless, often seem compelled to build counter-arguments around ideas of failure that are comparable to his own. Those who regard conceptual art, or institutional critique, as the most important development in art of the 1960s usually fit this description. Benjamin Buchloh, in his famous essay on the 'aesthetic of administration' of conceptual art, dwells on the inability of conceptual art to make a lasting interruption in the power of the 'specular regime' of capitalism (1990: 143). Hal Foster, whose critique of Bürger is perhaps the best known, affirms the importance of institutional critique as an avant-garde, but warns of its continual susceptibility to being co-opted (1996).

In his essay 'Dan Graham's *Kammerspiel*', Jeff Wall characterizes conceptual art as a 'reinvention of defeatism' permeated by its failure to transmute the critical theory of the New Left into art (Wall 2007a: 38). Wall clearly intends to invoke Art & Language's *'Documenta' Index* when he writes, 'the grey volumes of conceptual art are filled with sombre ciphers which express primarily the incommunicability of social thought in the form of art' (Wall 2007b). He continues,

If Pop is the cynical and amnesiac 'social realism' of the new 'bureaucratic collectivism,' Conceptual art is its melancholy Symbolism. In putting forward its forgotten card-files and printouts, its caskets of information, conceptual art recapitulated a kind of Mallarmean aesthetic: social subjects are presented as enigmatic hieroglyphs and given the authority of the crypt.

(Wall 2007b: 21)

Wall is also scathing about the attempt to politicize conceptual art in *The Fox*, describing it as an example of 'bureaucratic immobilization' that 'foundered in the sterile academicism which was the dregs of the New Left'. The full quotation reads, 'This late "Leftist" conceptualism was able only to produce negative polemical, or "self-referential," indictments which reiterated the idea of their own unthinkability as works of art. Bureaucratic immobilization was absolutized in the dreariness of the movement's final phase' (Wall 2007a: 40). This criticism ignores the content of the *The Fox*: the extent to which A&LNY were, as we have seen, self-conscious of the 'art bureaucracy' that they identified as permeating all artistic activity and inhibiting its revolutionary potential.

For Wall, failure reveals a limit that is imposed upon art by the wider process of historical development. As he puts it, 'the failures of conceptual art, measured against the possibilities the movement only glimpsed, are

therefore, even as failures, the most incisive reflection of the gap that had opened in the historical and political memory of modernism after 1939' (Wall 2007a:39). Wall's account of the limit to the politically transformative potential of conceptual art tends toward melancholic finality, however. The limit, when invoked in this way, requires judgements of success and failure to be stabilised. Wall allows the historical process itself to play the role of final arbiter.

This problem is clarified if we consider that the failures of conceptual art are a critical mirror-image of the movement's pervasive success. The arguments advanced above all involved art-critical stakes: the advocacy of one or another of the artists involved in the neo-avant-garde. For Buchloh, the works of Haacke, Buren, Broodthaers and Asher represent the most important tendency within conceptual art (Buchloh 1990). Foster builds on this argument, though also supporting the activities of more recent inheritors of institutional critique (Foster 1996). Jeff Wall's argument involves a sophisticated advocacy of the work of the artist Dan Graham, but also lays out an implicit justification for his own turn to post-conceptual photography (Wall 2007a).

On the one hand, the artistic careers of first-generation practitioners of conceptual art are stellar; on the other, conceptual art enjoys a pervasive artistic triumph such that contemporary art can be convincingly identified as postconceptual in terms of its 'historical ontology', according to a recent analysis by Peter Osborne (2013).

Osborne adapts Bürger in order to contend that conceptual art was the impetus for another transformation of the art institution after the 1960s. He suggests that 'the campaign [by conceptual-artists] against a certain "aesthetic" institution of spectatorship was at once antiinstitutional and the bearer of an alternative institutionalization, following the temporal logic of artistic avant-garde established at least a century before' (Osborne 2013: 37).

Osborne pointedly frames this argument as a supersession of Bürger's distinction between historical and neo-avant-gardes. In his view, the revolution in the institution of art, which resulted from the failure of the historical avant-garde, is subject to a further revolution because of the failure of conceptual art.

Osborne suggests that the neo-avant-garde contributes to the transformation of the 'social space' of art: by which he means art's ever-greater saturation by capitalist sociality. Attempts made by artists in the 1960s and 1970s to undermine the incorporation of art into official modernism inadvertently provided materials for a new form of capitalist cultural hegemony. Osborne's interpretation of institutional critique is more sophisticated than Andrea

Fraser's, but it points to similar conclusions:

The very existence of this critique within the institution – the institution's acceptance of institutional critique – negates the practical function of that critique, although not its intellectual value. *Institutional critique thus strengthens and develops the art institution.*

(Osborne 2013: 158, emphasis added)

Although it is true that institutional critique is contradictory, Osborne's seems to be an unduly apodictic interpretation of the consequences of this fact. For Osborne the contradiction automatically resolves into greater institutional stability. In order to challenge this reading it is useful to return to debates within *The Fox*, where the term 'institutional critique' was first used, and fashioned into a critique of art criticism.

INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE BEFORE INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE

In 1975, Hans Haacke, now usually understood as one of the first generation practitioners of institutional critique, showed his exhibition 'On Social Grease' for the first time at the John Weber gallery in New York. The work consists of six plaques, photo-engraved magnesium plates mounted on aluminium. Each plaque records a short statement concerning the relationship between art and business by a notable figure with connections both to the corporate and museum hierarchy of the United States. The one exception is a statement from the former President, then recently resigned, Richard M. Nixon, for whom no affiliation to a museum is recorded.³ The plaques communicate a 'modern' corporate aesthetic: Haacke was careful to shape the form of his work in relation to the content. The font is Helvetica, the archetypal modernist typeface that was at that time preferred by corporations keen to present their credentials in terms of an official modernism. Haacke acknowledged that the name *On Social Grease* was suggested by a 'remark from Carl Andre' (1975: 113). Most likely, Andre's suggestion was an interpretation of the statement of Robert Kingsley of Exxon Corp that reads 'EXXON's support of the arts serves the arts as a social lubricant. And if business is to continue in big cities, it needs a more lubricated environment'. The reference to 'grease', of course, also suggests the lubricity of the recent Watergate scandal, which had resulted in Nixon's downfall. This implication, however, is background to the obvious message of *On Social Grease*: that art has been instrumentalized by corporate interests, expressed in the words of figures who occupy exalted positions in the art institution. In the words of David Rockefeller, a trustee at MOMA, 'From an

economic standpoint, such involvement in the arts can mean direct and tangible benefits. It can provide a company with extensive publicity and advertising, a brighter public reputation, and an improved corporate image'.

Images of the six plaques from *On Social Grease* were reproduced in *Fox 3* at the end of a review by Mel Ramsden of *Framing and Being Framed: 7 works 1970–1975*, a survey of Haacke's work published by the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (Haacke 1975). Ramsden mentions Haacke's work a number of times throughout the three issues of *The Fox*. In the review 'Perimeters of protest' he writes, 'It's normally assumed that Haacke's work has political *content*. It doesn't. It has political *subject-matter*. The content really isn't all that controversial. Here again politics isn't internalized, it's *illustrated*' (Ramsden 1975b: 134, original emphasis). Nonetheless, it is also clear that Ramsden is not condemning Haacke's work outright. Rather, he is struggling to articulate what it might mean to create political artwork that attempts to expose its own connection to the interests of socio-economic elites. In his review, Ramsden explores the problems that he perceives in Haacke's work. He terms Haacke's output 'New-Left Radical Kunst', and suggests that it exudes 'a kind of smug security in *being in possession* of what's wrong – i.e. that the whole world is up shit creek and capitalism's to blame' (Ramsden 1976: 64, original emphasis). Although he concedes that this is 'patently true', the obviousness of the analysis seems to call into question why an artwork is needed to remind 'left-liberals of what left-liberals know already and tease the rich when the rich *love* to be teased' (Ramsden 1976: 65, original emphasis). Among Ramsden's list of 'complaints' against Haacke's work is that it is 'counter-cultural' because it exists '*in the same space* as the institutions it apparently is fighting [...] he not only serves the institution's veneer of freedom, he disappears when the institution disappears' (Ramsden 1976: 65, original emphasis).

However, Ramsden immediately nuances his analysis; he is not content simply to dismiss Haacke's intervention out of hand. He writes, 'But then that may not be all there is to what Haacke does. What makes a person's work political – *yeechhhhh* [*sic*] or, perhaps, activist, isn't subject matter or theme – obviously' (Ramsden 1976: 65).

Ramsden argues that his own 'complaints' might, paradoxically, be evidence of the success of Haacke's work. As he puts it, '*Complaining is or should be precisely the point!* It is here that the irresolutions, the stress points, the potential gaps in "rational" capitalist consciousness occur. It is just here, if anywhere, that Haacke's work "succeeds"' (Ramsden 1976: 65–66, original emphasis).

This is an interesting exploration of the intimate relationship between success and failure, which seems to be characteristic of the avant-garde identification with revolution. Criticism of the political 'subject matter' of Haacke's work segues into an argument for what Ramsden calls 'epistemological activism': an attack on the "common sense" of society itself (Ramsden 1976: 65). Ramsden is attempting to re-evaluate the question of failure. Importantly, he associates art-critical appraisal of politicized art with reification of art's politics. This is why he revolts against his own criticism: he is unwilling to contribute to neutralization of Haacke's political challenge by appraising it as art, successful or otherwise. Neither, though, can he simply address it in political terms. Instead, he is driven to re-evaluate the categories through which Haacke's might be understood. *On Social Grease* is reimagined as a stresspoint that exposes the illusion of distance provided by art criticism. Ramsden's assessment of *On Social Grease* seems to be that questions of success and failure need to be radically reevaluated if art is to be allowed to question its own ideological function. This is not failure as a pose of cynicism or resignation. Artistic 'failure' might be a form of success if it acts as a kind of 'epistemological activism', dislodging the criteria that underpin judgements about art. The object of Ramsden's criticism is not just Haacke's work but the artcritical framework that would deactivate Haacke's political challenge by finding a way to categorize it. By engaging in what seems to be art criticism, Ramsden attempts to reveal the institutional limitations of this form. The critique of art criticism is communicated frankly in another of Ramsden's articles of the period:

It seems to me that art-criticism provides us with a paradigm case of what art-world bureaucracy really is [...] a celebration of the world as diverse but neutral spectacle [...] Contrary to seeking some sort of uncovering of ideology the critic veils it.

(Ramsden 1975a: 70)

Haacke is now, of course, best known as one of the first-generation practitioners of institutional critique (Fraser 2005). It is important to emphasize that, at the point that Ramsden was writing about his work, Haacke had not yet been assimilated to this canonical formation. In fact, it was not until the 1980s that Haacke became identified with the term institutional critique, through the writings of critics and artists associated with the journal *October* and the Whitney Independent Study programme. It was also through the theorized art criticism of *October* that art criticism recalibrated its institutional function in response to the challenge of conceptual art.

In 1975, it was Ramsden who coined the phrase 'institutional critique', using it to describe the multifaceted interrogation of art undertaken by Art & Language at that time. In the essay 'On practice', Ramsden suggests that politicized art that is not embedded in specific concerns might actually work against itself:

To dwell perennially on an institutional critique without addressing specific problems within the institutions is to generalize and sloganize. It may also have the unfortunate consequence of affirming that which you set out to criticize. It may even act as a barrier to eventually setting up a community practice (language ... sociality ...) which does not just embody a commodity mode of existence.

(Ramsden 1975a: 71)

Ramsden's definition of institutional critique seems to rule out, in advance, the transformation of this term into a canonical marker. For Ramsden, institutional critique names the tactical–critical operation of an art collective. The art collective is part of a praxis that opposes the separation of roles that underpin art bureaucracy. It works against the reification and neutralization of art's politics:

The politicization of the category [art] means it must be related to 'the whole', that is, the class-cultural struggles in the rest of society. Either it means solidarity with these struggles or, as far as I can see it means cynicism, *politikunst* opportunism, in short, very little [...] The social reality is bizarre. Since the seat of ultimate authority now lies less with a particular class' iconography and more with its *institutions*, the problem now is to forge an *institutional critique*.

(Ramsden 1975c: 45–46, original emphasis)

This engagement with revolutionary Marxism is not bureaucratic in the way that Jeff Wall describes. Neither is it the confirmation of the art institution that Osborne identifies with institutional critique. Rather, it is an attempt to investigate the internalization of the demands of a system that has come to welcome a certain kind of 'political' content in art. Ramsden's intention seems to have been to destabilize the meaning of this acceptance, by addressing it from the standpoint of political revolution.

In an essay written in 1984, called 'Who rules the art world?', Carol Duncan argues that art criticism is the most important agent of power in the art institution, in a way that is consonant with Ramsden's argument: indeed,

Duncan participated in the same debates of the mid-1970s, where the activist group the Artists Meeting for Cultural Change tried to change the ideological tenor of art collecting in the United States. Duncan writes that 'criticism is the all-pervasive force that makes possible and unifies the market system. Its influence is felt from the moment of production, in the minds of artists, and continuously thereafter when the work is seen by a high-art audience' (Duncan 1993: 175). And also, 'criticism can decide which of many possible meanings a work can have and suppress others' (Duncan 1993: 174). Of particular interest here is the fact that Duncan views criticism as a form of labour that adds to the value of artworks: 'The critic [...] helps build the artist's reputation and also gives that reputation specific content. In the process, the work absorbs the value created by the critic's labour' (Duncan 1993: 173).

Of course, the key issue in conceptual art was that artists did not want to be subjected to a division of labour where they awaited the judgements of art critics. This is why Ramsden's art criticism is interesting: it is an attempt to subvert the codes by which art criticism is governed. The central point here is that art discourse is a crucial medium through which the art institution, as a social practice that forms subjectivity, is mediated. The irony is that the texts – art-critical, art-theoretical and art-historical – that diagnose the failure of conceptual art are also responsible for its success, its canonization – which is to say, they play a part in its failure, its neutralization. This is a fascinating problem to unravel, because it is a problem of art's ideology function. In one sense, the critical diagnosis of the avant-gardes communicates an ethos to a wider audience, allowing it to be reiterated and transformed. In another sense, the dissemination of these ideas tends to involve a betrayal of revolutionary ambition. In the very same space – the space of the text – the emancipatory dimension of the avant-garde can be amplified or muted. At the very least, this problem suggests that the meaning of failure, so widely affirmed in relation to the revolutionary ambition of avant-gardes, and enshrined in 'institutional critique', is ripe for reinvestigation.

CRISIS AND CONCEPTUAL ART

In the 1960s and 1970s, scraps of typed paper, non-descript photographs and opaque quasi-philosophical essays – conceptual art, in other words – confounded existing art-critical methods for arriving at judgements about art. The challenge presented by conceptual art was not simply its characteristic paucity of 'aesthetic' experience. In fact, conceptual art undermined the domain of art criticism by conceding ground to it, that is, by acknowledging the art

critic not as a competitor, but as a *participant* in the creation of a work of art. This insight was an integral part of conceptual art's challenge to the division of labour between art and art criticism, and an expression of the anti-authoritarian 'structure of feeling' that prevailed in the counter-cultural discourse of the period. Conceptual artists assumed responsibility for disseminating their own work, in the most pointed formulation of this task, to make the critic redundant. As Joseph Kosuth put it, conceptual art 'both annexes the functions of the critic, and makes the middleman [the critic] unnecessary' (Kosuth 1970: 2)

This sometimes seemed to mean that artists affirmed their right to determine the meaning of their work, and as such it was a reassertion of the Cartesian artistic 'ego'. It also meant, however, that art criticism was understood as a practice that was equivalent to, and implicated in, the production of artworks. This concession to the *constructive* role of art criticism within art made it possible to claim art criticism as a material of art, and to mount a direct challenge to the assumption that art criticism might be a disinterested dissemination of responses to artworks. This is one important consequence of what John Roberts calls the 'scriptovisual' research programme of conceptual art: its refusal of the strong categorical distinctions between the visual and the textual, which were part of Clement Greenberg's and Michael Fried's account of modernism (Roberts 2015: 142–56).

The emphasis on collective dialogue in Art & Language makes their colonization and transformation of the domain of art criticism especially important. As John Roberts puts it, their interpretation of the scriptovisual meant that 'artwork and the reflection on the artwork became indivisible and indeterminate' (Roberts 2015: 149). The emphasis on theory in the dialogue between the group and, after the *Documenta Index* of 1972, on the viewer of the work as a potential participant in discourse (rather than a 'beholder') was a fundamental challenge to the function of art criticism, as a mediator between artwork and public. Equally, it became in *The Fox* an attempt to redefine the political content of art criticism as an emancipatory practice. Although *The Fox* failed, it is important not to misrepresent its collapse as a bureaucratic reduction of art to politics, as Wall does. The debates in *The Fox* are acute in their attentiveness to the incorporation of art into a decorous 'standard of intelligibility' and an 'idealist separation of private from political-social life' (Ramsden 1975a: 65).

This was understood as *resistance* to 'art bureaucracy'. The collective dialogue of Art & Language was opposed to the idea that critical judgement required the separation of artwork, artist and critic into discrete functions in the wider process of art's social reproduction. Judgement, their practice implied, is only authentically possible if it is

discovered within and sacrificed to a socially embedded collective dialogue through which the reification of individual identity, and the ideological mystification that follows from it, might be addressed. Art criticism, by contrast, was viewed by Art & Language as an important ideological prop for individualism and pseudoavant-gardism. This is why, in 1976, *Art-Language* contained savage polemics against *October*, describing the publication as 'an omen of the growth of scholastic bureaucracy' and a 'journal of managerial idiocy' (Art & Language 1976: 29). It may also explain why critics involved with *October* have always tended to identify Art & Language as a 'late modernist' form of conceptual art, and to ignore the collective's important engagement with institutional critique.

As Michael Newman has observed, the turn to theory in art criticism, which is closely identified with *October*, was one of the ways that art criticism reinstated itself (as a mediator between art and public) in the wake of the challenge of conceptual art (Newman 2008). The journal was founded by Rosalind Krauss, Annette Michelson and Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, who formerly were critics at *Artforum*. Through the writings of Krauss, Craig Owens, Douglas Crimp, Hal Foster and Benjamin Buchloh, *October* played a key role in establishing the debate about postmodernism in the visual arts in the 1980s. Subsequently, critics and art historians associated with *October* have been instrumental in founding 'Contemporary art history' as a discipline in the United States (Singerman 2012). Although the choice of name of the journal implies an affiliation to the revolutionary avant-garde, the opening editorial of *October* does not stress revolution, but rather the cultural vitality of interdisciplinary developments in art:

Our aim is not to perpetuate the mythology or hagiography of Revolution. It is rather to re-open the enquiry into the relationship between the several arts which flourish in our culture at this time, and in so doing, to open discussions on their role at this highly problematic juncture.

(Anon. 1976: 3)

The collapse of *The Fox* and the founding of *October* conveniently marks a moment of transition – the end of the key phase of conceptual art and the resurgence of the discipline of art criticism. *October* was founded in 1976, briefly sharing the space with *Fox 3* on the shelves of Jaap Reitman's bookstore in New York, then a key location for the dissemination of advanced thinking about art. This shift is ambivalent: although *October* involved an important opening out of Anglo-American art into the continental philosophical tradition, it also re-established

the division of labour between art and art criticism, neutralising some of the most radical implications of conceptual art.

In an essay from 2006, Art & Language reflect on the construction of conceptual art as an art historical category, and upon the role that 'institutional critique' plays in this critical reception (Art & Language 2006). Interestingly, no mention is made of their use of this term in the 1970s: instead, Michael Baldwin, Mel Ramsden and Charles Harrison closely analyse the use that *October* critics make of the term 'institutional critique' in their overview of twentieth-century art, *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (Foster et al. 2012). The authors point out, using Benjamin Buchloh's work as their key example, that institutional critique becomes a term of critical approbation in this book. As they ironically put it,

The capacity for institutional critique is ascribed to *Homes for America* and denied to other forms of conceptual art. It seems that institutional critique is not here a property that distinguishes one work from another but an axiological term that signals approval. The mechanism by which the approval is gained appears to be a practical one, such as might one day be subject to Foucauldian study.

(Art & Language 2006: 121)

Institutional critique, in the domain of art criticism and art history, becomes a term with which to distinguish successful from unsuccessful art practices, according to a newly stabilized set of criteria. Failure is subjected to another modulation of its meaning in the process, in which the revolutionary dimension it contained in the first phase of Art & Language recedes. Although this standard account of 'institutional critique' has since been expanded to include a far wider range of practices drawn from Latin America, Eastern Europe and feminist practices of the Anglo-American artworld, it still suggests a narrowing of the problematic that was identified in the 1970s (Alberro and Stimson 2009; Molesworth 2006). The term 'institutional critique' tends to block sustained attention to the ideological position of art within contemporary culture. Even attempts to revive institutional critique as a critical programme tend to accept the *October* account of its genesis, and therefore neglect a fundamental issue: the ideological stability inherent in the separation between artwork, art criticism and art history (Raunig and Ray 2009).

CONCLUSION: ART HISTORY AND AVANT-GARDES

What is at stake in this obscure passage in 1970s art and art criticism? The intention is certainly not to discover a 'true' lineage of institutional critique; my argument takes it for granted that there were global art practices of the 1960s and 1970s that engaged in a critique of institutions, informed by the engagement with dissident Marxism and the New Left. There is no need to identify an 'origin' among them, or precedence between them. The most interesting history of institutional critique cannot be told as a story of artists and their works, in any case. Rather it is a history of reconfiguration: of the changes that took place in art's social organisation and the effect of these changes on the narratives of contemporary art history. The encounter between *The Fox* and *October* allows this reconfiguration to be reflected upon, through the lens of its relationship to revolutionary politics and 'failure'.

The discussion of *The Fox* in this article is also intended to demonstrate that institutional critique need not be conceived, as Andrea Fraser contends, solely in terms of the recognition of the 'consequences' of the failure of avantgarde movements. Equally, it is intended to show that avant-gardes can be oriented toward revolution without becoming Zhdanovist, in the way that Jeff Wall seems to have envisaged. Although art under capitalism cannot transform its relation to life praxis by any direct move into political emancipation, it may be that revolution retains a powerful destabilising influence upon criteria of success and failure. It is at the point of apparent failure that the deep structures of capitalist subjectivity present themselves to scrutiny. It is also at the point of failure that the ideological expression of those deep structures, the criteria of success and failure themselves, might be transvalued. An important feature of Roberts's position in *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-garde* is his insistence that art historical narration of the 'suspensive avant-garde' should not result in foreclosure of its emancipatory project.

This injunction forces Art history into an interesting puzzle of self-criticism, modelled here by an excavation of the emergence of the term 'institutional critique'. The encounter between institutional critique and revolutionary Marxism in *The Fox* might be written about only in so far as it is allowed to corrode the enduring conventions through which art is re-examined, or reproduced. How is this trick to be carried off? Ideally, the marks of corrosion should be left on display to encourage whatever it is that avant-gardes continue to try to bring into being. The contradictions involved in such a project are, of course, compelling. This article has been an attempt at exploring something of their complexity.

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