# Bastard Conceptualism:

## The Decline of Institutional Critique and the Turn Toward Visual Culture

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In the sullied pools of digital mass culture, under the shadow of the Hollywood sign, the spawn of conceptual art lives. A mutant, but not unfriendly, breed has emerged from the swamps of late modern culture. If conceptual art directed its critical gaze toward the stuff of artmaking and toward the institutions which house and support art, its offspring, a kind of recent bastard conceptualism, directs its criticality elsewhere, outward toward what is, more broadly speaking, visual culture.

Permit me to recall of few key events in this history:

By the late 1960s Robert Morris had come to believe that Greenburgian modernism's dictum that 'the materials should speak' went for the stuff of minimalism too. Thus, in a canny move that put Pollock's drips, as investigation of the properties of materials,[1] in the same camp as Richard Serra's molten lead, Morris eschewed the antagonistic split between abstract expressionism and proto-conceptual art and thereby anticipated the current state, in which art can be understood less as a series of oppositions than as a network of exchanges – exchanges with both other art and with mass culture. Thus, instead of 'Pollock versus Morris', we see Pollock into Morris. So too, the pop musician, Björk, might be one's favorite visual artist, or a prime-time soap, your favorite artwork. So too, instead of artist versus institution we see artist into institution. Lamentably, this

[1] Robert Morris, *Continued Project, Altered Daily*, p 77

institutionalization does not signify the greater establishment and power of the artist; rather it speaks more to the artist's dispersal and to the waning import of art's older institutional frame, the museum. (Would that the CIA and the USIA were still involved in international art exhibitions!)

My premise is this: That in the US, institutional critique has declined and artists have turned toward visual culture; and that this marks the decline in the symbolic value of the museum; this in turn is part of a waning bourgeois public sphere and a concomitant hegemonic shift toward, or, as one might say in the current vernacular, a rise in the share price of, popular culture – mass culture – that is, mass culture supplants museum culture and is understood to be the real, authentic culture. *But that's what we always wanted, no? Well, be careful what you ask for*. For this apparent democratization – more people, ordinary folks, making more visual stuff, more iTunes, more digital movies – comes with its own limits, rights and proprieties. In the US this 'mass culture' is increasingly regulated, witness the legal pursuit of users of music sharing software, to mention but one instance of how a democratic medium is being tightly stitched up by controlling interests. It is only at the level of reception, then, that a shift has occurred: museum culture is perceived to be 'the bad guy': ignoble, less than disinterested, arrogant – and boring to boot. Compare that to the appearance of 'spontaneously erupting' popular/mass culture, the iMac-ification of art in which everyone shall be an artist, the Motoroling of photography, the DIY of book publishing and design, the proliferation of Fotolog enthusiasts. – Now, lest I sound like some sort of neo-Adorno, which I am not, I should disclose, that 'I heart my Mac' and my Motorola phone's okay too. But my point is this: the critique of the institution is moot, and even the museums themselves confess this in their endless drives

toward 'inclusion' – *Let's have DJs at the opening, let's give out free drink tickets, let's do an all-inclusive show about LA history.* In short the museums—and I mean 'Art' museums, at least where I live in Los Angeles – have internalized the notion that museum culture is boring and that mass culture will get you bums on seats – which is just the art-world version of the ideology that so-called free-market capital (manifest as mass culture) *is* democracy. So contemporary bastard conceptual artists have to ask themselves: *What is to be done?* – Institutional critique seems like kicking a dog when it's down, and popular culture – mass culture – seems like going into the belly of the beast.

Allow me to return to the past:

In 1971 Hans Haacke's exhibition of his Shapolsky Real Estate project at the Guggenheim Museum was cancelled. The cancellation, taken to be a threat to free speech, caused an out-pouring of protest. Though accusations of, on the one hand, 'bad behavior', and on the other, 'censorship', opposed each other, both shared the belief that art in the museum should be public, common and free. So, though Haacke's *Real Time Social System* exposed the limits of this contract, social contract it none-the-less was.

When in 1979 Michael Asher moved the bronze equestrian statue of George Washington from the exterior of the museum and into the period room for 18th century artifacts, it was the museum that Asher was really moving. His transposition moved the institution from neutral frame to object of scrutiny. But more so, Asher's strategy moved the museum from neutral vessel to active participant: *73rd American Exhibition*, as it was called, could not have occurred without the complicity of the Art Institute of Chicago.

In 1992 Fred Wilson appropriated Asher by shuffling the Maryland Historical Society's holdings, placing on display that which wasn't usually on view, recontextualizing those things that were. Yet Wilson's use of this strategy came to somewhat different ends. Wilson removed from the dusty back rooms and storage facilities, the museum's artifacts documenting the slave trade. In this move Wilson shifted the emphasis away from institutional critique per se – the critical reflexivity so distinctive to Michael Asher's work and to so much that came under the rubric of Conceptual art – to the instrumentalization of art as an opportunity to engage with critical social realities beyond the institution. This by the early 1990s was in itself quite a familiar strategy: as Mary Kelly put it 'oppositional post-modernism implemented a shift at the level of content … putting the so-called synthetic proposition back on the agenda…that is, saying that art isn't confined to speaking about art. It can refer to things outside itself, it can have what you would call "social purpose."'[2]

Further, Wilson's 'social purpose' comes less out of 'opposition' than 'service'. The Maryland Historical Society had to want its critical makeover. In Wilson's project, *Mining the Museum*, the museum itself is transformed: once a neglected institution it became a throng of peoples of varied ethnicities and, by its own terms, a much more successful institution – it was if the spell of repression that had doomed the museum to never show the half of its holdings that documented slavery had sent the museum into a deep slumber only to be awakened by the kiss of Wilson's critical generosity. For Wilson's was a

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[2] Benjamin Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry*, p 220, quoting Kelly from 1986

criticality that refused an oppositional stance and instead engaged with the living histories of the individuals who worked in the institution and who maintained, administered and housed it, without whom, his artwork, and much of the museum's story, could not have been told.

Institutional critique has always at least implicitly resonated with the social. Yet the exchange between Wilson and the Maryland Historical Society marked something different: a reciprocity, a relationship mutually beneficial but also very clearly beneficial to the larger social context. Difficult to repeat, this strategy has itself already played out as cliché. Witness the proliferation of institutions that would love Fred Wilson to *come and do them too*. So too, if the institution needs its artist, the institution may also subsume its artist. In recent memory, the museum as a location for critical intervention has become almost a playing field, in which artists are invited to select works of art, aspects of museum structure etc. The work of Sophie Calle, Ilya Kabakov, Andrea Fraser's humorous erotic encounters with the walls of Frank Gehry, speak to the neutralizing or diminution of critical affect and indeed a, humorous, shall we say farcical, return to institutional self-reflexivity: *Oh look it's another witty play on the status of the museum.* But, having said that, let us not forget the frosty response in 1999 that Michael Asher's de-accession piece received from the Museum of Modern Art, which he did for their show, *Museum as Muse*. Did they really think Asher would have lost his critical edge? Notably, a quick search on MoMA's web-site reveals nothing about the artist or the work they commissioned from him. I guess that means they got what they asked for.

So perhaps Asher is the exception that proves the rule: in a period when art institutions are less dominant, more embattled, less influential than influenced, museums, to draw their

audience, are increasingly focused upon neo-con populist block-buster exhibitions and/or the lure of spectacular architecture. In this context, the revelations of a latter-day Hans Haacke, or Michael Asher, become less compelling. It is as if these institutions already *undo themselves* – their evident desperation, the overwhelming nature of the architecture, their conspicuous bowing to electoral and fiscal winds. As I asked before, *Why kick a dog when it's down?*

Artists who draw upon the legacy of conceptual art no longer necessarily direct their critical gaze toward the institution nor indeed do they necessarily make art as such: it might rather be cooking or a book or a set of props or theatre or musical design or writing or historical analysis or film study.

Allow me then to conclude with a few examples, briefly described, of this bastard conceptualism, belly of the beast stuff all.

In TV Toyland: In 1993 The Barbie Liberation Organization switched the voice boxes on hundreds of Teen Talk Barbie and Talking GI Joe Dolls and then secretly placed the dolls back on store shelves across the United States. The following is a brief clip of what ensued:
[video: The Barbie Liberation Army]

Under the sign of Hollywood: In 1995 I was a member of a group called the GALA Committee which began making and manipulating props for the soap, Melrose Place, at that time being shot on sets just up the hill from CalArts where I was teaching at the time.

Mel Chin, who was also teaching at CalArts, initiated the project. Mel had been invited to participate in the exhibition, *Uncommon Sense* at MoCA Los Angeles. The premise of the exhibition was to introduce work that 'reach(s) out far beyond the conventional limits of the museum'. This was code for the kind of out-reach that is the well-intended 'good-works' of institutions with a public face: the other participants in the show addressed audiences of the black, Latino, working-class and lesbian communities. When Mel suggested that his 'alternate audience' was the fan-base of Melrose Place, MoCA was not impressed. In the end however, the Museum and indeed the writers, producers, set designers and actors on Melrose Place had become members of the GALA Committee. This sprawling project over several years with more than 100 artists, writers, theorists and students used prime time TV as its canvas – and to what end? To, for example, contravene the FCC regulations against showing unrolled condoms on television and this on a show that involves lots of sex but no sexually transmitted diseases. Or to depict colorful paintings of the sites of LA's darker history, the murders and beatings so resonant here: from Rodney King, to OJ Simpson to Sharon Tate to Robert F Kennedy. Most tellingly, the GALA Committee found that some of the folks from Spelling Television who seemed to understand the project best, were, in the 1970s, Conceptual Artists.

Hollywood reruns: In 2000 I completed my montage, *Toilet Training*, which I situate somewhere between a film studies essay and an artwork. Within the gallery world it is an impossible object, because without permissions from the many films and soundtracks used, it cannot be bought or sold. So, it circulates as much through art school libraries, lectures and syllabi as it does through exhibitions. *TT* came out of a course I teach called *Water Closets: Bathrooms, Modernity and the Return of the Repressed* in which 'the repressed'

erupts in popular film. Each year, my students, colleagues, friends and I add to the stock of Great Bathroom Scenes in Cinema, from which *Toilet Training* is an excerpt of the most iconic. *TT* is part of a larger project examining the residues of the twentieth, American, century and its obsession with hygiene.

Lastly an untold history: artist Ken Gonzales Day is currently completing a history of lynching in California. Drawn to its political implications and coming out of this bastard conceptualist mode, the project has turned into a book, a photographic history, an essay. It is the content of this academically turned project that is most compelling, a conceptual piece turned into a publication and history. The artist has taken it upon himself to track down these photographs and narratives, because no-one else had.

Artists, in the thick of visual culture, are taking conceptual strategies and running with them and who knows where that leads. In the entire modern period art has been grappling with its status vis-à-vis the social, vis-à-vis ordinary life, sometimes retreating from, but more often approaching, more and more closely, its imbrication with, and ultimately, complete disappearance into, the social. Perhaps if the wish of last century's avant guard is fulfilled in this century, the very term 'artist' will go the way of say 'natural philosopher', an anachronism, an obscure and obsolete nomenclature. But the art of service, and art as service, critically engaged and conceptually driven, will none-the-less prevail.