Decontextualisation, Autonomy, and the Neo-Avant-Garde: Institutional Critique and Museum Criticism

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Perhaps it is simply a coincidence that the English-language titles of two of the most significant works of museum theory and criticism of the late modern period rest upon an architectural metaphor. Perhaps it is also a coincidence that both of these titles, Andre Malraux's *The Museum Without Walls* and Douglas Crimp's *On the Museum's Ruins*, refer to the breaching of the architectural envelope, the breaking down of the museum's integrity as a bounded, discrete, or autonomous realm.[1] But then again, perhaps this is no coincidence at all. Indeed, if there was to be any over-riding metaphor that could encapsulate the state of the museum institution in the modern period, it is hard to see any that would serve better than the architectural. And if there were to be a theme that most characterised the work of critics of the art museum through the same period, it would surely be the attempt to break through the boundaries that isolate the museum from life praxis, to 'ruin' it by breaching its 'walls'. As Hugh Kenner has observed, '[t]he history of twentieth-century art may someday appear to have been simply a death struggle with the museum.'[2] The attempt to dismantle the museum's walls, whether literally or figuratively, is thus the sign of a desire to inhere the museum within the world, to render its edges permeable, even non-existent, and thus open to the free and reciprocal flow of light, space, time, people, objects, and commerce.

Throughout the museum's history, declarations that the institution is itself 'dead', finished, ruined, a spent and outdated force, have frequently been balanced by condemnations of its process of 'killing' objects, subjects, art and history in order to represent them. The argument hinges around two different conceptions of the museum – one as a benign institution which passively collects objects that have already died, as it were, of natural causes, and the other as a murderous institution that stalks and 'kills' objects, dragging them into its lair never to see the light of day again.

The critical discourse which works against the museum as understood in this way – as a 'deadly' and destructive agent – is most fierce in its treatment of art museums, which in Daniel Sherman's words provide 'the most elaborately articulated instance of decontextualisation as a strategy of power.'[3] In light of this, it is interesting to note not only that the critical project of 'ruining' the museum by breaking down its walls has re-occurred throughout the history of the institution, but that it has taken both practical and conceptual forms – it can be identified in art practice as much as in museum theory and criticism. This paper will set out to trace this trajectory through several manifestations: firstly, in the historical avant garde, here exemplified in the rhetoric of Fillipo Marinetti, and later in the neo-avant-garde movement known as institutional

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[1] In fact Malraux's book was released under this title only in its English translation – the original French title was *Le musée imaginaire*. But this in fact underscores my point, rather than undermining it. If we can assume some equivalence between an 'imaginary museum' and a 'museum without walls' then surely it also follows that a museum is free to be more 'imaginary' if it is not fettered by the earthly constraints of walls, and indeed of architecture at all.

[2] Hugh Kenner, 'The Dead-Letter Office', in *Museums in Crisis*, ed. Brian O'Doherty, George Braziller, New York, 1972, p. 172.

[3] Daniel J. Sherman, 'Quatremere / Benjamin / Marx: Art Museums, Aura, and Commodity Fetishism', in *Museum/Culture: Histories, Discourses, Spectacles*, ed Daniel J. Sherman and Irit Rogoff, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1994, p. 123.

critique. Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-garde*, and Hal Foster's later re-reading of this in his essay 'What's Neo About the Neo-Avant-Garde?', will serve as tools for the analysis and interpretation of these moments. It will thus be possible to observe a significant parallel between the avant-garde project of breaching the museum's walls, and a key trend in the 'new museology' – towards liveliness, openness, and the contiguity of the museum with the everyday world.

The polemically anti-museum stance of the Italian Futurist movement, and in particular of their spokesman FT Marinetti, is well known. The Futurists saw in museums a cult of the past, and expressed in a series of manifestoes their 'disgust' for the 'fanatical worship of all that is old and worm-eaten.'[4] In this conception, museum visiting is a form of 'poison' to the young artist, one that can only cause 'decay', especially when contrasted with the violence and vitality of the Futurist ideals of energy, aggression, speed, and militarism.[5] Marinetti writes that while it is acceptable to visit museums once a year, 'as one visits the grave of dead relatives,'[6] they are really places for the dying, invalids, and prisoners, not for the young, strong, and 'living'.[7]

There is a binary opposition at play here: the Futurist dedication to the sound and fury of the instantaneous, fleeting moment of lived experience is pitted against the apparently unchanging, silent and funereal space-time of the museum, conceived as a mere archive of 'old pictures'. Such a conception implies not only that the museum is irrelevant and outdated, but that it actually encroaches upon and stifles life and creativity in the present, preventing a direct and spontaneous engagement with the 'now'. Accordingly, in a fit of ecstatic iconoclasm Marinetti exhorts his fellow artists to 'set fire to the bookshelves!...Turn the canals and flood the vaults of museums!... Let the glorious old pictures float adrift! Seize pickaxe and hammer!'[8]

Marinetti's opposition here is clearly not only to museums, but to the idea of art as separate and indeed alienated from life praxis in the present. An opposition to decontextualisation, the ways in which art museums 'kill art to write its history', in Quatremere de Quincy's words, can thus be recast as an opposition not only to the museum, but to the museum as it institutionalises autonomous art. This is the general position set out by Bürger, who argues that the historical avant-garde can be defined by its desire to bridge the characteristically modern schism between the realm of art and that of the everyday.

Bürger derives his theory of the avant-garde, and in particular his conception of the role of autonomy within it, from Theodor Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. According to both Bürger and Adorno, the autonomy of art was historically determined, coming about through the separation of art from its magical or cultic origins – its 'disenchantment' – equally as it was separated from pragmatic functions in religious, courtly, or everyday life. Bürger writes that '[o]nly after art has in fact wholly detached itself from everything that is the praxis of life can two things be seen to make up the principle of development of art in bourgeois society: the progressive detachment of art from real life contexts, and the correlative crystallization of a distinctive sphere of existence, i.e., the aesthetic.'[9] The autonomy of art also entails a separation from the function of

[4] F.T. Marinetti, 'Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto,' 11 April 1911, in Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art*, p. 289.

[5] Marinetti, 'The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism', p. 287.

[6] Marinetti, 'The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism', p. 287.

[7] Marinetti, 'The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism', p. 288.

[8] Marinetti, 'The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism', 288.

[9] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, translated by Michael Shaw, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984, p. 23.

entertainment. In short, artworks became autonomous by negating their own historical origins: as Adorno writes, 'art retrospectively annihilated that from which it emerged.'[10]

This separation was certainly a product of historical conditions, and doubtless had many and complex causes and effects, but there are two that are most important here. The first is that the aesthetic came to be seen as a realm separate from the empirical world, and therefore that aesthetic experience came to be a special category of experience.[11] The second was the inauguration of the art museum in its modern form, and thus the isolation and institutionalisation of art as a special category of human endeavour, distinct from natural history, anthropology, and even a broader conception of history itself, as these are constructed in and by museums. In Bürger's theory, the historical avant-garde was specifically, and polemically, opposed to both of these moments. It is clear that the two are interrelated, that the art museum functions as both the alibi and to a certain extent also the enforcer of art's alienation from the world, and its 'confinement in an ideal realm'.[12] It is little wonder, then, that the avant-garde directed much of its ire against the museum, as the tangible, physical, and indeed architectural symbol of art's separation from life.

But here there is a contradiction, as Bürger argues: it was at just the historical moment when art came to be seen, understood, and appreciated for its own sake, and that the project of the historical avant-garde even became possible, that its separation from life praxis also rendered art irrelevant. The avant-garde thus struggles against the conditions that made it possible at all, and is defined by that which it set out to destroy – which includes the museum. Bürger argues that after the failure or dissolution of the avant-garde project, as emblematised by the inability of artists like Marinetti to actually and successfully reconcile art with life, there came a subsequent, identifiable neo-avant-garde. This was conditioned by the experiments that had preceded it – its artists could not ignore the avant-garde's attempts to break down art's alienation and autonomy, but neither could they ignore the continuing fact of this alienation and autonomy. In Bürger's terms the neo-avant-garde were, amongst other things, engaged in a critique of the ways in which the historical avant-garde had been progressively institutionalised – the proof of the failure of its project.

The neo-avant-garde was thus in a difficult position – unable to proceed under the illusion that art could be truly engaged in social life, its artists were obliged to either move on in the knowledge of art's inevitable detachment, or to take the autonomy of autonomy itself as their subject. For this reason, much of the work of the neo-avant-garde was concerned with the framing conditions of art itself, the ways in which art is defined, constructed, and given value by the institution of art – the entirety of its structures of production, reception, and evaluation.

The neo-avant-garde's movement inside the museum's walls, as distinct from the avant-garde's more naive and violent project of breaking them down from without, is thus a sophisticated double-play. Acting as a kind of Trojan horse, it acknowledges the power and permanence of the museum's role in framing and defining art. As Bürger writes, '[n]eo-avant-gardiste art is autonomous art in the full sense of the term, which means that it negates the avant-gardiste intention of returning art to the praxis of life'.[13] This is particularly true, and particularly revealing, in that specific genre of the neo-avant-garde known as institutional critique.

Institutional critique could be defined, in the words of Benjamin Buchloh, as the attempt to 'integrate within the conception of a work, the final forms of distribution and the conditions of reception and acculturation, the modes of reading that ensue from them and that are contained

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[10] Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, Athlone Press, London, 1997, p. 3.

[11] Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 23.

[12] Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 50.

[13] Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 58.

within the practices of institutionalisation'.[14] It takes the institution itself as its subject, examining the methods by which the structures for the display, dissemination, and sale of art – structures including art criticism, history, and education – construct meaning and value, whilst disguising their own complicity in these machinations of the culture industry. More than this, though, institutional critique is concerned to subvert the art museum's power to designate what is art and what is not, and mount a powerful challenge both to the framing effects of the museum and to modernist definitions of art. Institutional critique exposes the museum's decontextualisation of art as being equally a *recontextualisation*, re-placing art within a network of narratives, ideologies, and structures of legitimation and control.

The advanced mode of institutional critique is usually characterised – and I am deliberately following a canonical or conventional definition here – through the work of Marcel Broodthaers, Hans Haacke, Daniel Buren, Louise Lawler, and Fred Wilson, amongst others, and especially all of these, as Hal Foster has noted, as they were influenced by the work of Marcel Duchamp.[15] It can be briefly introduced here, and its iconoclastic power demonstrated, through two classic examples. First is the work that Michael Asher 'created' for the Art Institute of Chicago's 73rd American exhibition, which was a simple but effective act of recontextualisation. Removing the museum's 18th Century bronze statue of George Washington, which had stood at the front of the museum for more than fifty years, he placed it inside the museum in a small gallery dedicated to European art of the same period. As Anne Rorimer wrote of this moment, '[h]aving been displaced from the front entrance of the museum, where it had served as a commemorative and decorative object, *George Washington* was put in the position of being seen in conjunction with other art. By being shown in the middle of the gallery at eye level, the sculpture of Washington was divested of its former purpose as a public monument.'[16]

Another more politically engaged example would be Fred Wilson's 'Mining the Museum' exhibition, installed in the Baltimore Museum of Art in 1992. This exhibition used a similar process of recontextualisation to examine how the museum excludes certain historical narratives, in this case Afro-American history. Wilson exposed the museum as an instrument that silences the 'other' by exclusion; in a glass case labelled 'metalwork 1793-1880', surrounded with elaborate silver pitchers and goblets, he inserted a set of slave manacles, and thus demonstrated the profound effect of context on the meaning of both the object and its institutional frame. By introducing a marginalised history back into a traditional, provincial museum, Wilson was able to invoke the multiplicity of stories excluded by a modernist historical metanarrative.

In this context, the idea of the 'museum piece' takes on quite a new connotation: it is still, in a sense, an artwork designed 'for' the museum, not attempting to take up an independent life in the world, or to reconcile art and life in the avant-garde manner. But rather than accepting the museum as an end in itself, the 'museum pieces' of the neo-avant-garde continue their work after their incarceration. Far from being defused or simply 'dying', these works act as irritants, coming to their critical fruition within the museum's walls.

And it is at this point that the various threads that I have attempted to trace in this paper can be drawn together. Bürger argued both that the project of the avant-garde was always contradictory,

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[14] Benjamin Buchloh, 'The Museum Fictions of Marcel Broodthaers', in *Museums by Artists*, ed. AA Bronson and Peggy Gale, Art Metropole, Toronto, 1983, p. 45.

[15] Foster refutes Bürger's theory that the neo-avant-garde institutionalises autonomy, writing that 'to repeat the historical avant -garde, according to Bürger, is to cancel its critique of the institution of autonomous art; more, it is to invert this critique into an affirmation of autonomous art…the repetition of the avant-garde by the neo-avant-garde can only turn the antiaesthetic into the artistic, the transgressive into the institutional.' Hal Foster, 'What's Neo About the Neo-Avant-Garde?' in *The Duchamp Effect*, ed. Martha Buskirk and Mignon Nixon, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1996, p. 13.

[16] Anne Rorimer, '73rd American Exhibition, Gallery 219, The Art Institute of Chichago', *Museums by Artists*, ed. AA Bronson and Peggy Gale, Art Metropole, Toronto, 1983, p. 22.

given that attacks against art's autonomy were themselves made possible by that autonomy, and that the project eventually failed, as evidenced by the rise of the neo-avant-garde. He argued that the answer to this aporia is not to simply collapse the distance between art and life; it is its very distance from social praxis, its alienation, that allows autonomous art to take a critical stance on life in the world. The collapsing of this distance would result in the loss of art's critical function, and the project of 'sublating' art into life must inevitably lead to the dissolution of art as a distinct category altogether. This becomes particularly telling for my purposes here when a parallel is noted, between the aims of the historical avant-garde, and the trajectory of much contemporary museum criticism. I would argue that the actions of contemporary museum theorists and critics who decry the museum's alienation from the world, its mausoleum character and isolation behind supposedly impenetrable walls, consciously or unconsciously echo Marinetti's exhortation to 'seize pickax and hammer' and tear those walls down. Marinetti's crude iconoclasm may be virtually unrecognisable in the sophisticated contemporary discourse of museums, but it is buried there nevertheless. This is more than a curious coincidence. It is the mark of a common project – to collapse distance and to console alienation, to refuse autonomy, and to inhere both art and museum within the space, time, and experience of the everyday. And neither is this contemporary trend entirely metaphorical: attempts to make the institution ever more lively, interactive, and entertaining also have significant implications for the museum's actual walls, for its architecture.

Even more interestingly, while the historical avant-garde had little actual success in dissolving the way art is reframed by the art museum, the new museology has had quite a measure of success in breaking down the barriers between the museum and the world. In some museums of natural history, science, and particularly of social history, the boundaries between everyday, empirical life in the present and the space and objects of the museum are now virtually invisible.

The drive towards 'liveliness' in the museum has become enmeshed with ideas of democracy, populism, and accessibility in a way that makes it hard to refute. Of course, the identification of the museum's exclusivities and complicities, its unspoken assumptions and prejudices hidden under the presumption of authenticity, objectivity, and truth, has been a valuable project indeed. The chasm between museum and world has historically been constituted partly by a hegemony over 'high' culture both covertly ideological, and overtly exclusionary. But just as Bürger argued that the dissolution of autonomous art into life is a 'profoundly contradictory endeavour', one which would dissolve the critical utility of art along with its autonomy, it is possible to see the mode of museum criticism that seeks to 'ruin' the institution, break down its walls and reinhere it with the world, as also 'profoundly contradictory'. It could be argued that a museum entirely dissolved within the everyday would have neither a critical nor indeed a particularly interesting stance in relation to the world. It is possible to argue that the complete reconciliation of the museum with life would also mean the dissolution and dispersal of the museum until its very distinctness, along with its value to society, was lost.

It will not be possible to address the full implications of this proposition here. But it is possible to make some brief observations, and frame some questions which might form the basis of further work. The first of these is the question of causality – of whether this branch of the new museology has come about as a belated but direct consequence of the avant garde project, or of something else – perhaps a more thoroughgoing postmodern critique of institutions. This in turn leads to the question of why and how a position that is characteristic of an *aesthetic* avant garde, and which therefore might be thought to apply only in the realm of art, has migrated out into other cultural discourses. Why, in other words, has a critique that was once specifically directed towards art museums come to bear upon other genres of museum, and other categories of artefact, and does this point to the increasing aestheticisation of all museums, or their growing reliance on aesthetic, or affective, interaction.

But perhaps the most pressing question to arise from the constellation of ideas and themes I have attempted to set out in this paper relates to the *distinction between* the critique

enacted by the historical avant-garde, as opposed to the later, more subtle and more knowing stance of the neo-avant-garde. To put this bluntly, is the new museology repeating the mistakes and contradictions of the avant garde, and if so, is there a call for an equivalent shift in museology, even a neo-new-museology. This would entail the recognition that there is some value, even if negatory, in the alienation of the museum from life in the world in the present. It would propose that it is only through 'killing' objects, mortifying and tearing them from their context in the world, that they can, as shades, in the museum have the life that the instrumentalised world denies them. And even more crucially, it would recast this process as a specifically critical one, stripping objects bare of the accretions of affirmative culture, and revealing the blindness of simple assent to the culture that we have. These are, of course, large propositions. But what it is possible to say with certainty here is that the widespread attempt to break down all distinctions and barriers between the museum and the world should not be simply or uncritically accepted.