

Lee Timko

Institutional Critique /
Relational Aesthetics

When thinking about institutional critique and relational aesthetics I feel it is important to preface with a history of conceptual art. Then we will delve deeper into post-studio artists working within the institutional critique model. Foucault's theories of critique and power will be asserted into a supplemental model based on the Panopticon. From there we will segue into relational aesthetics and some contemporary artists working within that system set up by Bourriard.

Conceptual art questions the nature of art at its core. Within this model, the concept(s) or idea(s) utilized in the work take importance over the materiality and aesthetic traditions. Sol LeWitt claims, "...In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art."

French artist, Marcel Duchamp, set the framework for conceptual artists through his ready-mades. Joseph Kosuth wrote in his 1969 essay, "All art (after Duchamp) is conceptual (in nature) because art only exists conceptually." With this being said, we can assume that the work of contemporary institutional critique and relation aesthetic artists would not be plausible without the contributions of the early conceptualists.

"Just as art cannot exist outside the field of art, we cannot exist outside the field of art, at least not as artists, critics, curators, etc. And what we do outside the field, to the extent that it remains outside, can have no effect within it. So if there is no outside for us, it is not because the institution is perfectly closed, or exists as an apparatus in a 'totally administered society', or has grown all-encompassing in size and scope. It is because the institution is inside of us, and we can't get outside of ourselves." (Fraser, 2005:282)

The artistic practice we know as “institutional critique” seems to conjure up an inextricable link between method and object. The object would be the ‘institutions’ and the method being the ‘critique’ of these ‘institutions’. The first wave of institutional critique artists spanned from the 1960s to the early 1970s. Questioning art institutions, mainly museums, and the power they hold. These works from the first generation artists manifested themselves in many different forms. Institutional critique in some ways can be said to have arose out of minimalism. These works are usually site-specific and could also be linked with the earthwork movement. Robert Smithson claims, “Museums, like asylums and jails, have yards and cells—in other words, neutral rooms called galleries. A work of art when placed in a gallery loses its charge, and becomes a portable object or surface disengaged from the outside world. A vacant white room with lights is still a submission to the neutral [...] the function of the warden-curator is to separate art from the rest of society. Next comes integration. Once the work of art is totally neutralized, ineffective, abstracted, safe, and politically lobotomized, it is ready to be consumed by society.” (Smithson, 2001: 16)

One of the most influential artists that worked within this model would be Michael Asher. Born on July 15, 1943 and passed away earlier this year in October. Michael Asher was “...among the patron saints of the conceptual art phylum known as institutional critique, an often esoteric dissection of the assumptions that govern how we perceive art.” (The New York Times: 2005) Instead of creating objects in a studio, Michael would change existing environments and use experience and space as his medium instead of clay, canvas, and paint.

In one of his early works, from 1974, Michael removed the back wall from the Claire Copley Gallery in Los Angeles, thus exposing the back wall and letting the public see the money making process behind art. Artists like Asher working within this model typically disengage with the idea of the romanticized artists working in solitude creating objects for society. By using

experience and space as their medium, they rely totally on the sophisticated discourse that backbones the ideas behind institutional critique. In this way it can leave layman viewers feeling alienated and/or marginalized.

In 1970 at Pomona College, Asher created a work of art by reconfiguring a gallery and then leaving it exposed, without an entrance for twenty-four hours. By doing this he let in the light and noise of the street, into the gallery, as experiential elements of the piece. This can be seen as a postmodern exploration the experiential qualities of space as medium. Asher's work took the form of subtle yet deliberate interventions—additions, subtractions or alterations—in particular environments. His pieces were always site-specific and temporary. Whatever he moved or destroyed was put back after and restored to its original order.

In 2010, Asher was awarded the Backs Baum Award from the Whitney Museum in New York City. This prize was given to artists whose work would be included in that year's biennial. Asher's piece was to leave the museum open twenty-four hours a day for a week during the run of the biennial. This was a fantastic supplement to the "city that never sleeps." Unfortunately, for budgetary reasons, the museum was only able to stay open around the clock for three days. Michael Asher says, "I throw away the clock. There is never enough time to get everything said. I want my work to animate debate."

In relating Foucault to institutional critique, I feel it mandatory to bring up his 1978 lecture, "What is Critique?" In this lecture, Foucault claims that critique developed, as the art not be governed *like* that. So, it could be said that the relationship between government, and the idea of not be governed *like* that is still a prerequisite today for reflecting on the contemporary relationship between institution and critique.

Foucault also claims that our subjective experience is socially and historically constituted by factors that we unconsciously internalize. Foucault, being Nietzschean at heart, puts a huge

emphasis on the richness and variety of reality. In this respect, reason and rational discourse become problematic, because they require us to assert our reality into an artificial reality that then accommodates our concepts.

In terms of first and second-generation institutional critique artists, the first generation sought to distance themselves from the institution itself; whereas the second addressed the involvement of power in the institution. The first generation challenged and questioned the authoritarian role of the cultural institution. The second generation lost this authoritarian, power view, due to the fact that this had been done before. In relating the role of power to the institutions, Foucault refers to his Panopticon diagram as, "...this must not be understood as a dream building: it is the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form." (Foucault: 1970) Foucault asserts that power rests in the middle and the cells that the power occupies encircle it.

Hans Haacke, another early first generation institutional critique artists claims that, "It is uncomfortable for me to be a politicized artist...the work of an artist with such a label is in danger of being understood one dimensionally without exception...all artworks have a political component whether it's intended or not."

Due to its highly sophisticated understanding of modern art and society, and due to the fact that this is a privileged, specialized discourse unlike that of anything other form of knowledge, can leave layman viewers feeling alienated or out of the conversation. Institutional critique is a practice that only advanced artists, theorists, historians, and critics can participate in. Because of this, the audience that understands this work is of a smaller percentage than that of normal work. This can be considered a critique on institutional critique.

"Also, I am not interested in art works that suggest process within the metaphysical limits of a neutral room. There is no freedom in that kind of behavioral game playing. The artist acting

like a B.F. Skinner rat doing his tough little tricks is something to be avoided. Confined process is no process at all. It would be better to disclose the confinement rather than make illusions of freedom.” (Smithson, 2001: 16) Institutional critique is, after all, not primarily about the intentionality and identities of subjects, but rather about the politics and inscriptions of institutions (and about how subjects are always already threaded through specific and specifiable institutional spaces.)

In the early 1990’s, Nicolas Bourriaud claimed, “The role of artwork is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever scale chosen by the artist.” Through their work and through these encounters, meaning is elaborated collectively, rather than in the space of individual consumption. In this model, the artist can be more accurately viewed as the catalyst, rather than being at the center.

Bourriaud claims relational aesthetics is, “...a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space.” So, in a sense, this is work that creates a social environment in which people can come together and participate in a shared activity collectively in a space. During the 2012 Whitney Biennial, artist Dawn Kasper worked in the museum for three months straight, letting the public interact with her while she was working and letting these influences affect the outcome of her work. This experience of seeing the lonely, isolated, romanticized artist at work is an important aspect of the work for the viewer. The experiential qualities of the work are what transcend the physical “object.”

In accordance to relational aesthetics, Bourriaud is interested in the effect that contemporary social context has had on in-person interaction. With the increase of social media and the Internet boom, the possibility for interactivity between people has been restricted and

reduced. Rikrit Tiravanija, an artist working in creating in-person encounters, prepares and serves Thai food for his audiences during his openings. So the idea of one walking through a museum, looking around at objects no longer exists. Instead, the viewer activates the space upon entrance, and in return that activates the viewer.

These artists are present for the most part during their work, but for instance artists like Olafur Eliasson, create work that still activates the viewer, giving them the catalyst to behave and see the work however they wish. This type of art that engages the visitor through participation and experiential encounters is the epitome of relational aesthetics.

In Claire Bishops essay in response to Bourraud's work on relational aesthetics, she says, "There can be no failed, unsuccessful, unresolved, or boring works of collaborative art because all are equally essential to the task of strengthening the social bond...While I am broadly sympathetic to that ambition, I would argue that it is also crucial to discuss, analyze, and compare such work critically as art." With this being said, I sometimes find that this type of work can be far too difficult to categorize completely.

Ben Lewis brings up a much different viewpoint on relational aesthetics, he says, "...I'd say all their work was informed by a crushingly naïve political viewpoint that could only have been nurtured in the bubble of an art school. I think the misfortune of that kind of art is that it's politically imbecilic, and on an intellectual level they're still living off the arguments of the Frankfurt school—Adorno and Horkheimer—from the sixties. They argued that we are all slaves to something called dominant ideology; this bourgeois thing that was constructing our way of thinking for our politics, our society and us. Whereas the world we live in today is one that actually offers us much more choice to resist, rebel and construct our own community and I don't think any of the artists in that program have really taken that on board. The weakness of the art to me is that it is quite patronizing actually. They're trying to tell me something that I

disagree with and they're saying 'Because we're artists we know better', and I think that's one of the Modernist art myths that they haven't managed to get rid of." (Ben Lewis, 2004: Tate) This gets at the notion of "anything goes" and the problems that can provide.

As an artist that makes objects, I find problems with institutional critique and relational aesthetics. Although I understand where these artists are coming from, I still cannot get away from the thrill of creating objects. I do not think that these progressive art movements will replace painting and traditional aesthetics, but will only add to the conversation and discourse that we live in as artists. Without the developments of post-structuralist thinkers like Rorty and Foucault, institutional critique and relation aesthetics could not have the backings that they do. These ideas provide the framework for one another and help to inform themselves as well as the other.

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INSTITUTIONAL
CRITIQUE
&
RELATIONAL
AESTHETICS

Conceptual Art

- Art in which the concept(s) or idea(s) involved in the work take precedence over traditional aesthetic and material concerns.
- “In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of it, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.”
–Sol LeWitt

Just as art cannot exist outside the field of art, we cannot exist outside the field of art, at least not as artists, critics, curators, etc. And what we do outside the field, to the extent that it remains outside, can have no effect within it. So if there is no outside for us, it is not because the institution is perfectly closed, or exists as an apparatus in a 'totally administered society', or has grown all-encompassing in size and scope. It is because the institution is inside of us, and we can't get outside of ourselves. (Fraser, 2005: 282)

Institutional Critique

- Focuses on the web of underlying and often hidden conventions that surround art and how art is viewed, valued, and used in society.
- Seeks to make visible the historically and socially constructed boundaries between inside and outside, public and private.
- Critical of the false separations often made between distinctions of taste and supposedly disinterested aesthetic judgment and affirms that taste is an **institutionally cultivated sensibility** that may tend to differ according to the class, ethnic, sexual, and gender backgrounds of art's audiences.

- Emerged out of the developments of Minimalism and its concerns with the phenomenology of the viewer, as well as formalist art criticism and art history (e.g. Clement Greenberg, Michael Fried), conceptual art and its concerns with language, processes, and administrative society.
- Often site-specific, and perhaps could be linked to the advent of the “earthwork” movement by minimalist artists such as Robert Smithson and Walter De Maria.
- Associated with the developments of structuralist and post-structuralist philosophy, critical theory, and literary theory.

Museums, like asylums and jails, have yards and cells – in other words, neutral rooms called *galleries*. A work of art when placed in a gallery loses its charge, and becomes a portable object or surface disengaged from the outside world. A vacant white room with lights is still a submission to the neutral [...] The function of the warden-curator is to separate art from the rest of society. Next comes integration. Once the work of art is totally neutralized, ineffective, abstracted, safe, and politically lobotomized, it is ready to be consumed by society. (Smithson, 2001: 16)

Michael Asher



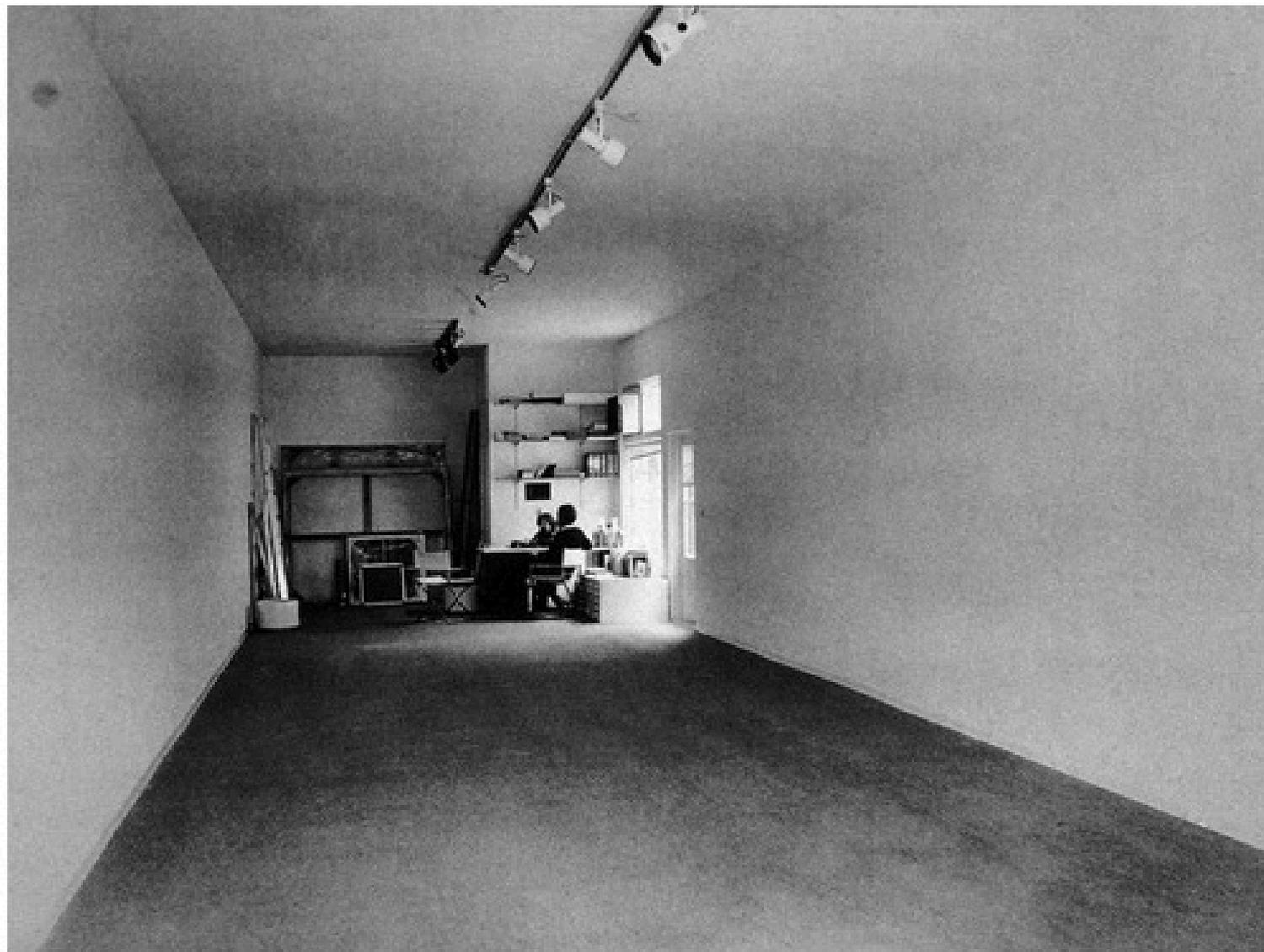
Michael Asher

- July 15, 1943 - October 15, 2012

“...among the patron saints of the Conceptual Art phylum known as Institutional Critique, an often esoteric dissection of the assumptions that govern how we perceive art.”

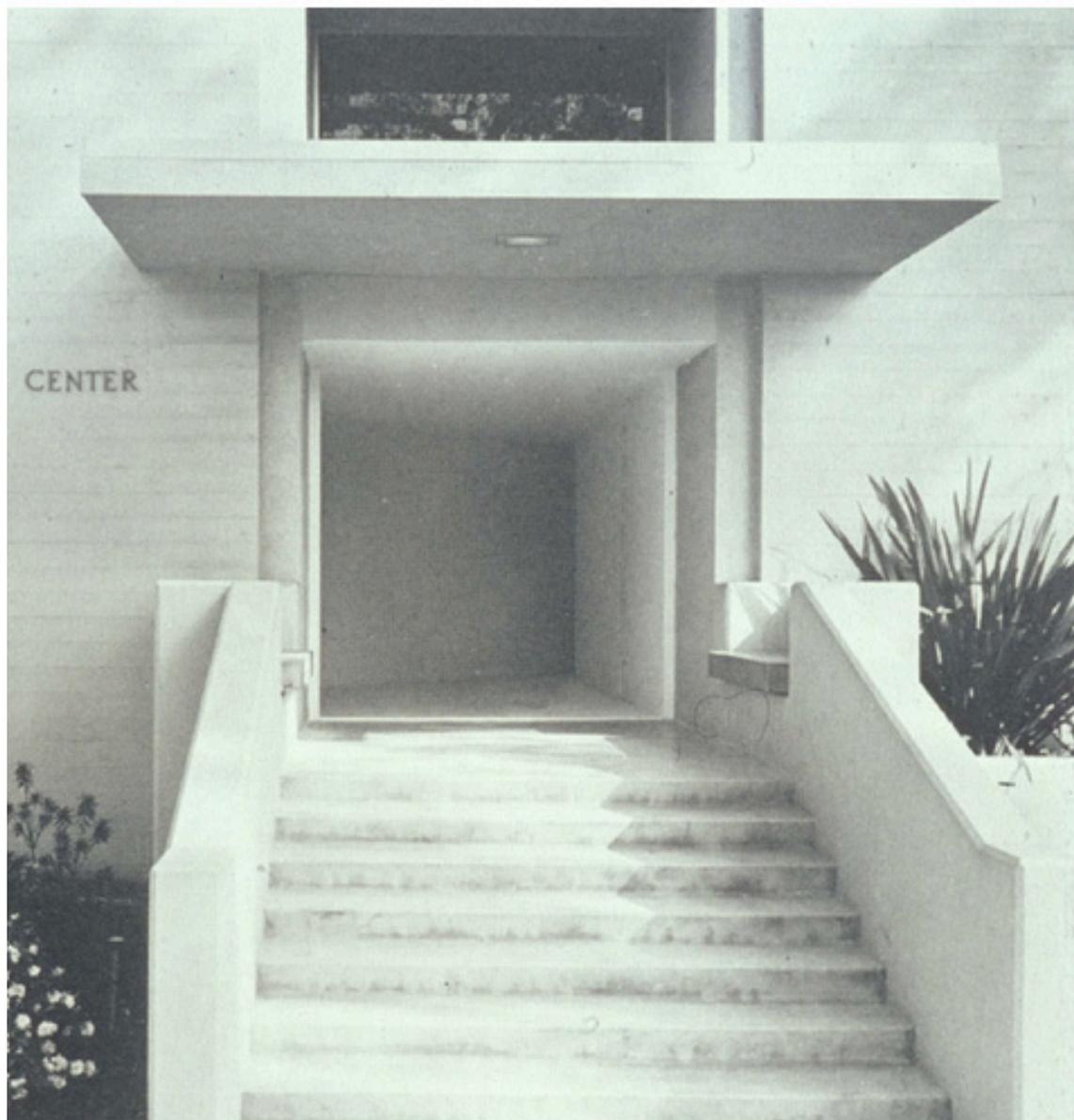
–The New York Times

- Rather than designing new art objects, Asher typically altered the existing environment, by repositioning or removing artworks, walls, facades, etc.



Michael Asher, *Untitled* (1974. Installation view, Claire Copley Gallery, Los Angeles)

- in 1970 at Pomona College, he created a work by reconfiguring a gallery and then leaving it open, without a door, 24 hours a day, introducing the light and noise of the street into the gallery as experiential elements.
- Postmodern exploration of experience and space as medium.



Michael Asher. *Untitled*, Pomona College, 1970



- Asher's work takes the form of "subtle yet deliberate interventions – additions, subtractions or alterations – in particular environments." His pieces were always site-specific; they were always temporary, and whatever was made or moved for them was destroyed or put back after the exhibitions.



Michael Asher, *Project for Galleria Toselli*, Milan, 1973



Michael Asher, Installation Münster (Caravan) 1977-2007

Repeated every 10 years, the temporary exhibition features a single caravan placed in various locations throughout Münster Germany, which change week on week. The original locations from 1977 could not always be reused in each subsequent show as the city changed and evolved over time.

There is a beautiful play between the spacial and the temporal apparent in this, time inevitably changes the nature and form of a place. The caravan itself is a symbol of displacement, by nature nomadic and created distinctly for its lack of spacial permanence. Placing it in an environment external from the traditional gallery space Asher is challenging our acceptance of the enclosed heterotopia of the gallery, taking it out of itself and creating new audiences.

- “Asher doesn’t merely grant privilege to the art idea over the art object. Instead he embraces experience as fundamental to a meaningful work of art.” – Christopher Knight, art critic for The LA Times.
- In 2010, Mr. Asher won the Whitney Museum’s Bucksbaum Award, a \$100,000 prize given to an artist whose work is included in the museum’s biennial. Mr. Asher’s piece for that year’s biennial was characteristic in its deceptive simplicity: to leave the museum open 24 hours a day for a week during the run of the biennial, a fitting accommodation to a city around it that never sleeps.
- For budgetary reasons the museum was able to stay open around the clock for only three days.

WHITNEY
AMERICAN ART MUSEUM OF

- ~~Monday, May 24~~
- ~~Tuesday, May 25~~
- Wednesday, May 26
- Thursday, May 27
- Friday, May 28
- ~~Saturday, May 29~~
- ~~Sunday, May 30~~

Museum open continuously from
Wednesday May 26 at 12:00 am
through Friday May 28 at 11:59 pm.

OPEN ALL DAY ALL NIGHT

- “I throw away the clock. There is never enough time to get everything said. I want my work to animate debate.” – Michael Asher

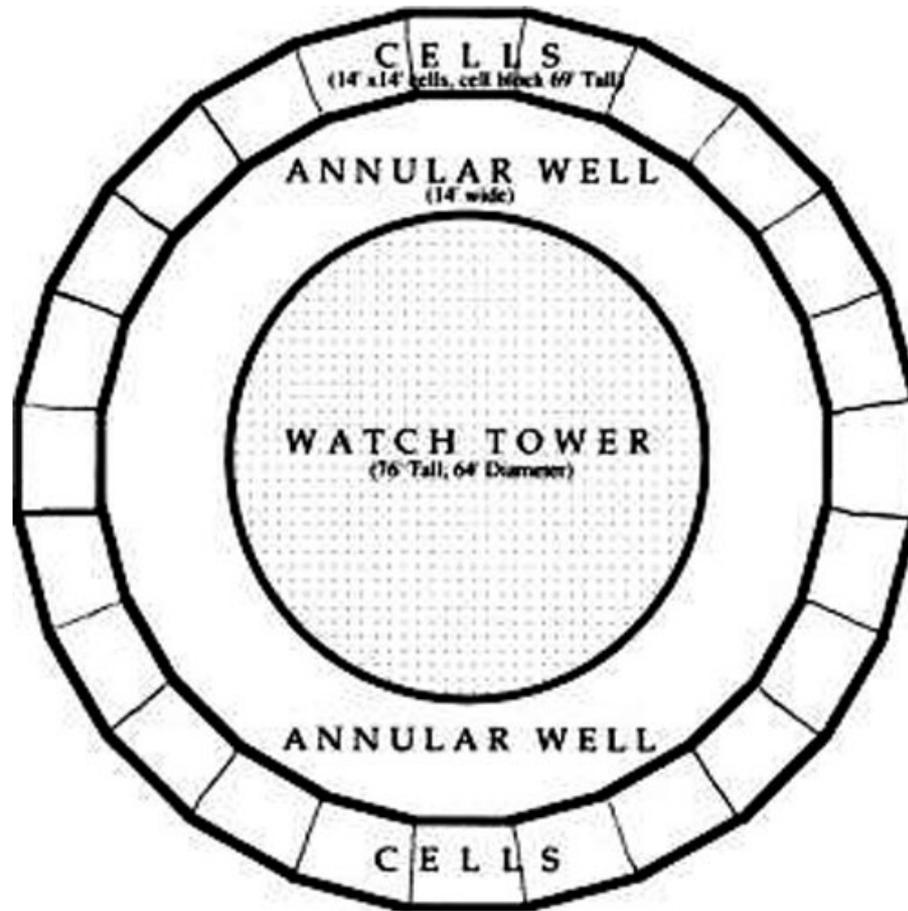
“What is Critique”

- Foucault’s 1978 lecture.
- Critique developed as the art not to be governed *like that*.
- It may be said that the relationship between *government* and *not to be governed like that* is still a prerequisite today for reflecting on the contemporary relationship between institution and critique.

- Foucault asserts that our subjective experience is socially and historically constituted by factors that we unconsciously internalize.
- Drawing on Nietzsche's emphasis on the richness and variety of reality. Reason and rational discourse are problematic because they require that we squeeze the variety of reality into the artificial homogeneity that accommodates our concepts.

- Knowledge is related to discursive formation.
- Practices and institutions produce those claims to knowledge that the system of power finds useful.
- Discourse brings objects into being by identifying, specifying, and defining them. As an example, Foucault cites psychiatry, which declares that schizophrenics exist and then views them as the objects of therapy.

Panopticon



...the Panopticon must not be understood as a dream building: it is the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form. Michel Foucault, 1977

Hans Haacke

- His work focused on the art world and the system of exchange between museums and corporations and corporate leaders; he often underlines its effects in site-specific ways.
- “It is uncomfortable for me to be a politicized artist... the work of an artist with such a label is in danger of being understood one dimensionally without exception... all artworks have a political component whether it’s intended or not.”

MoMA Poll



Hans Haacke, *MOMA-Poll*, installation, 1970.

MoMA Poll Question

- “Would the fact that Governor Rockefeller has not denounced President Nixon’s Indochina Policy be a reason for you not voting for him in November”
- Haacke’s question commented directly on the involvements of a major donor and board member of MoMA, Nelson Rockefeller.
- This installation is an early example of what in the art world came to be known as institutional critique.

Hans Haacke

- [NEWS](#) (1:47)

Critique of Institutional Critique

- A practice only advanced artists, theorists, historians, and critics can participate in.
- Due to its highly sophisticated understanding of modern art and society, as a part of a privileged discourse unlike that of any other specialized form of knowledge, it can often leave layman viewers alienated and/or marginalized.

Relational Aesthetics

- Originally observed and highlighted by French art critic Nicolas Bourriaud.
- “a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space.”
- The artist can be more accurately viewed as the “catalyst” in relational art, rather than being at the center.

- Artwork that creates a social environment in which people come together to participate in a shared activity.



Dawn Kasper at Whitney Biennial, 2012

Dawn Kasper

- [Whitney Biennial - 2012](#) (2:43)

Rikrit Tiravanija



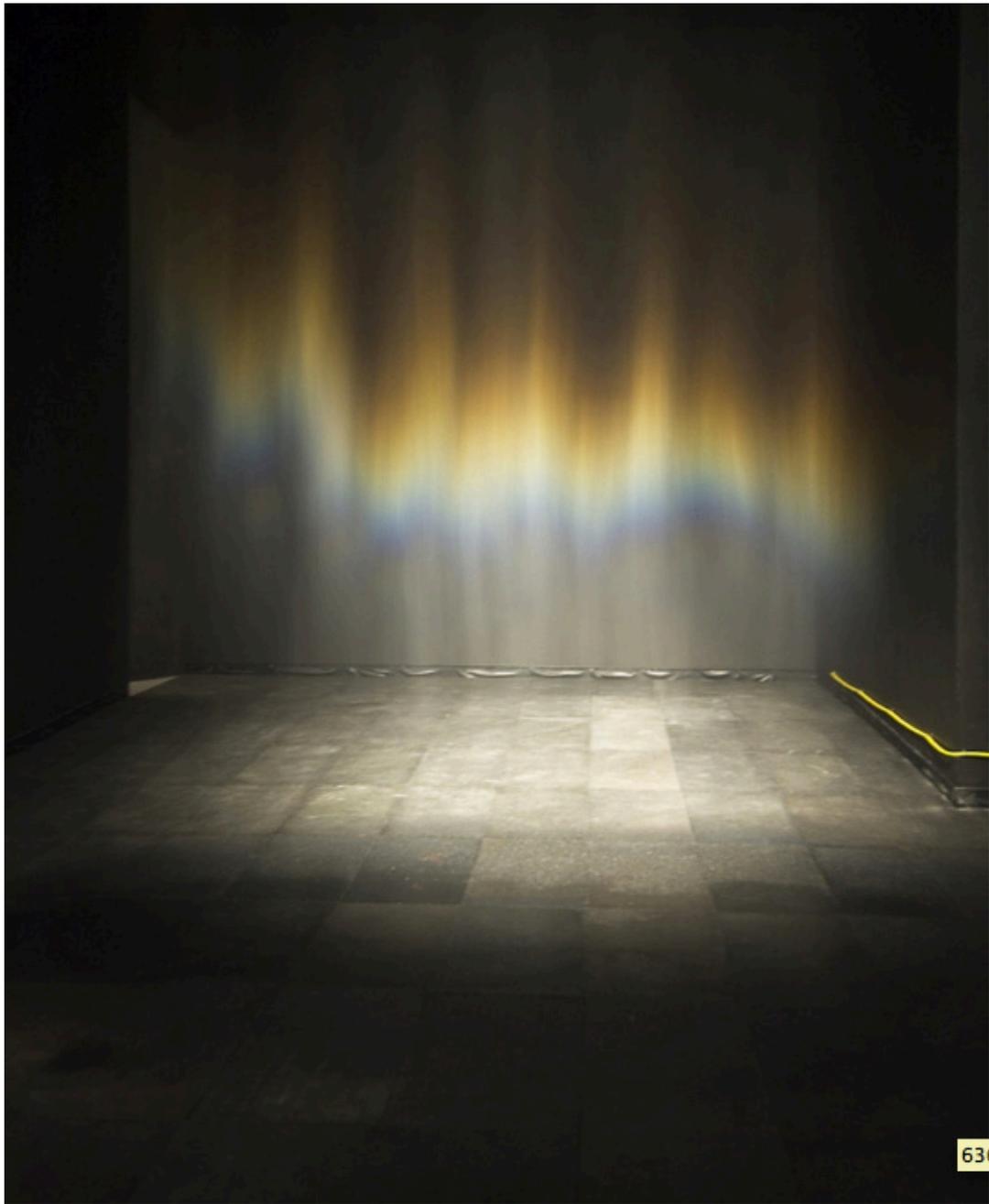
[video](#)
(1:16)



Olafur Eliasson



Installation view of "Take your time: Olafur Eliasson" at MCA Chicago, 2009



Olafur Eliasson

- [Tate Shots](#) (3:42)