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Ambiguous Exhibitions, Ambiguous Institutions

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Abstract

The institutional theory of art seeks to answer the question "what is art?" with the following ambiguous formula: something is art if conferred the status art by an art world. This position eliminates the issue of the ambiguity of art status by establishing a clear framework within which artefacts are considered art. Accordingly the concern of institutional theorists, such as Danto and Dickie *et al*, has been directed towards outlining those institutional apparatus of the art world such as galleries, museums and critics that confer the status of art and frame meaning. Once the institutional framework is accounted for, the ambiguity concerning art status is considered resolved. Although Howard Becker describes a pluralist vision of art worlds, art is still understood to be whatever is deemed art within such frameworks.

This approach however, in overlooking the key role and changing nature of the institution itself, is problematic. Specifically the ambiguous nature of the art institution is missed. Using the relationship of graffiti and installation to the art institution I will discuss what could be called "ambiguous exhibitions". These art forms maintain an unclear relationship to the established art world yet instances of exhibition and institutional structure are often visible. It is this realty that posits the problematic of the ambiguous nature of the art institution.

The issue of what counts as an exhibition heralds a new debate concerning institutional aesthetics and ambiguity. In short it shows that there is scope for ambiguity in the meaning of the term "art world". Instead of ambiguity operating on the level of art status, it is here operating on the level of institutional status. Consequently, the ambiguous nature of such exhibitions brings back into the play the nature of the curator, the gallery, the critic, the museum, etc.[1]

Keywords: Ambiguous, Artefact, Art world, Curator, Gallery, Graffiti, Immaterial, Installation, Institution, Material, Re-evaluation, Street Art.

Institutional theorists have been keen to offer an unambiguous account of the art world. This desire is problematic, insofar as it overlooks the ever-changing nature of both the artefacts

[1] This article was first presented as a paper on the occasion of the *Skepsi* conference *Ambiguities: Destabilising Preconceptions* (22nd–23rd May 2009, University of Kent, Canterbury).

and the practices upon which are conferred the status of art. I will focus on examples of installation art, such as street art and graffiti, that blur the distinctions between what is considered art and what is considered non-art (rubbish) as instances of institutional ambiguity.

Initially defined by Arthur Danto, the concept of the 'art world' is characterized like so: 'to see something as art requires something the eye cannot decry — an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art; an artworld.' (Danto, 1964, p. 580) Institutional theory thus takes a seemingly unambiguous approach to the question of art, whereby something is art, if the art world or an art institution confers on it the status of art. Steven Davies offers a useful definition of this approach to art. 'To be an artwork, an artefact must be appropriately placed within a web of practices, roles, and frameworks that comprise an informally organised institution, the art world.' (Davies, 2006, p. 38)

Therefore, the logic of institutional theory runs as follows: art institutions confer art status by naming and framing artefacts (and by extension related practices). But most importantly art institutions confer art status by distinguishing certain artefacts from others because this clarifies what is an art institution in the first place. As such, the art institution becomes a site of value, because it contains valuable objects and hosts valuable events. In this system, artefacts, defined by art institutions as art, belong to the highest class of objects to be both produced and consumed within capitalism. This is the case insofar as objects considered as art are showcased by the art world as ideal economic goods by being unending in the scope for increased value and removed from the coarse depreciation of use.

Furthermore, the institutional classification that occurs in the practice of the art world is responsible for what is excluded as much as what is included. Rubbish, metaphorically speaking, is that which is no longer an economic good and also not art, as the lowest category of object, is disqualified from the gallery. Both classifications, namely art and rubbish, derive from the same institutional activity. Thus, in defining what counts as an object of art, institutions are equally responsible for the creation of rubbish 'as much as' they are responsible for the creation of quality. It can consequently be observed that the traditional aesthetics of the art institution establishes a political dynamic, which draws a clear distinction between outside and inside. For example, location within the art world is confirmed by presence in the gallery, whereas identity as an aesthetic artefact is established through the use of the frame.

The purpose of this article is not to catalogue what is contained within the gallery or outside the gallery but to understand the operations of the distinction itself and specifically how the terms of this distinction are subject to re-evaluation. It is this possibility of re-evaluation that I

will focus on. Here, I will show that the unambiguous approach of the art world to artefacts is disrupted by challenging the very essence of what an art world and art institution are. Specifically, I will claim that the operation of the art world, in distinguishing between the artwork and the non-artwork, is subject to a certain ambiguity. This ambiguity is the sense that such distinctions are fluid, as is witnessed in the advent of the ambiguous exhibition. An exhibition can be ambiguous in so far as it interrupts the clear structured operation of the art world. Installation art is a case of such ambiguity because it disrupts the usual distinctions of the art world by forcing the issue of immateriality as a concern when it comes to defining art. The significance of this can be seen in the central role that the idea of that the artefact itself was allotted in the definitions of the art world cited above.

Essential to the notion of installation art is the distinction (and this distinction is one of the art world distinctions alluded to earlier) between installation art itself and the installation *of* art. Put simply, in the installation of art, the arrangement is secondary to the works contained therein. Herein lies an implied distinction between materiality and immateriality. For example, the *Mona Lisa* can be seen to possess the same aesthetic qualities when it is hung in the National Gallery in Washington as it does in the Louvre in Paris. Idealised here, is the role of the curator as arbitrator of taste, operating devoid of ideology and practicing a sort of neutral hanging of artefacts. Whereas, in the case of installation art, it is the positioning of the work that is central to its essence and how it is to be interpreted.

In Bishop's words: 'Installation art presupposes an *embodied* viewer' (Bishop, 2005, p. 6). By embodied viewer Bishop is referring to the phenomenological subject posited in the writings of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty *et al*. Briefly, for phenomenologists, the subject and the object is but an artificial division. It is also a division that we see replicated in the institutional accounts above. Embodied perception, however, is where both the object and the perceiver co-exist. Ascribing to a piece a certain immaterial and ambiguous quality, or at the very least something beyond mere material qualities, is made central to the operation of the piece as art. The issue could be put like this: the work is ambiguous insofar as it is interactive. It is this indeterminacy, in the shape of the embodied viewer that is seen to be the grounds on which installation art can supersede the economy (and distinctions) of the art world. It is in this context that the use of actual rubbish as art makes sense because it is precisely because of the disqualification of rubbish from the gallery that artists have been keen to engage it as an artistic material.

I am taking it as given that such an account equally applies to graffiti. Here the work is equally ambiguous insofar as it is open to embodied perception. Moreover, as it is illegal and

is also seen to break with the culture industry, the ambiguity of the status of graffiti as art is also at play. The dilemma for the institutional theorist in these cases is whether to regard such work as art or as rubbish. However, I maintain, that instead of superseding the art world, the institutional ambiguity inherent in graffiti and installation art is better understood as developing as well as disrupting the operation (and distinctions) of the art world.

In disruption, we should not classify installation art as being independent from the art world economy but rather as a political challenge to the operational development of the art world. Installation is, after all, a category of the art world, just as the movement from graffiti as vandalism (or, in other words, rubbish or non-art) to graffiti as street art (or simply art) is a reversal art world categories or values. In other words, to incorporate graffiti as street art (or art) is to reverse the existing definitions of art. In short, disruption accommodated is but a part of the institutional game and a common stage in the recognition of avant-garde practices in the history of the art world.

By focusing on these ambiguous practices, I am proposing that all art is (in some way) installation art and all installation art is institutional. Considering this claim, we can see that it is a restating of the premise of the institutional theory of art. But the purpose of restating its premise in this way is to take account of the avant-garde tendency to offer us an anti-art position. Why then merge installation art with institutional practice? By merging these two, we see that the avant-garde is equally tied to the distinctions of the art world, just as the idea of trash is tied to the idea of what art is. It is worth noting that, although a highly contested term, one aspect of the avant-garde is a movement that proposes a new formulation for what art can be. While there are other formulations of the term, it is in this sense that I will refer to the avant-garde. It is not anti-art in a general sense; rather it is anti-art in the sense of its reformulation of the institutional categories of distinction. The avant-garde, thus, allows new forms of creation to be given voice, in order to claim the status art, by changing the boundaries of what counts as art from within the art-world.

Installation art, like graffiti, may be considered not only as overcoming the simple installation of an artefact to be looked at, but also as a kind of avant-garde exhibition. As such, while they embrace an ambiguous status in relation to the art world, they remain institutional by proposing new ways of exhibiting. An example of this is what I call *The Graffiti Gallery* at the baths in Blackrock, Co. Dublin

THE GRAFFITI GALLERY

Here we see an exhibition that operates with a blurring of the distinction between installation art and the installation of art. In other words, here we see an ambiguous exhibition, which is ambiguous insofar as it poses the following questions: is it institutional, anti-institutional, art, or the display of art?

The overcoming of the distinction between what is exhibited and the way it is exhibited as essential is perhaps easier to view when we consider the agents of each. The installation of art is the work of the curator. Installation art, however, claims some degree of artistic creation or generation. As such, contemporary practice (installation art and graffiti/street art) points to a merging of these notions in the example of the artist as curator and curator as artist.

In other words, just as installation art is institutional, the installation of art is no neutral practice. The curator is artist as much as the artist is curator. As Robert Hughes notes, '[i]n America the *Mona Lisa* turned into its own facsimile, (Hughes, 2008). The possibility of a neutral hanging or installation of art should be considered as naïve. Thus, in moving beyond the opposition of installation art and the installation of art, we are beginning to develop the concept of the artist as curator. The graffiti artist is a good example of this person. They decide where to hang their work. This is what (or more precisely who) is at stake in the ambiguous exhibition.

This curator/artist is the new agent in the contemporary art world. Whereas artists traditionally traded in terms of artefacts, this new person operates where the exhibition is the unit of artistic meaning. Thus, beyond the distinction of installation and institution, I wish to focus on the role of exhibition. This captures the merging of both of the two and their site of ambiguity better. It is worth asking what kind of artistic unit the exhibition is. The exhibition is both the installation of art and a piece of installation art. That the exhibition itself would be an example of the installation of art is clear, but that the installation of art would be an instance of art only makes sense when one considers the possibility of installation art. The traditional installation of art may ostensibly lack the embodied viewer, but on the scale of an exhibition it, like installation art, presupposes such an embodied viewer.

By equating exhibition with installation, I hope to offer a new way of thinking about both. Thus, when Bishop writes that installation, in terms of 'site-specificity […] is a way to circumvent the market' operations of the art world (Bishop, 2005, pp 17-20), I believe we can now see the limits of such circumvention. These limits are first and foremost temporal, as installation offers the art world market a new dynamic of exhibiting to exploit. That dynamic is the ambiguous exhibition being, in time, subject to circumvention it initially sought to overcome. It is through the development of graffiti into street art that we witness this new market practice. In fact, the emergence of graffiti into a practice of installation art is the revenge of the market. No longer can practices such as installation art or graffiti be considered as wholly ambiguous forms of exhibition. There now exists the firm suspicion that the work is somewhere institutionally certified as art.

It is clear that graffiti offers us the bulk of the features of installation art; namely site-specificity, destructibility and space for varieties of embodied experience, etc. However, the institutionalisation of graffiti (by this I mean the presentation of graffiti in galleries) presents us with a different art object; an art object that is closer to the traditional reified painting. Often images are sprayed canvases instead of walls. In fact, that is the difference between the gallery and other locations; in the institutional setting we are presented with graffiti as art object. These installations of graffiti as art come with the standard restrictions of the art institution: 'look but don't touch'.

In the case of the curator as artist and the aesthetics of exhibition, we have moved beyond another distinction of the art world: not only are curators the artists of the gallery, but graffiti artists are curators of the city. In a way, they are curators of trash; they are vandals. As such, the site of the art institution is unlimited. Thus, by recognising the exhibition as the unit of

meaning in the art world and as something that has space for ambiguity, as opposed to the artefact, we can include those practices that challenge the artefact centred operation of the art world. In other words, when the exhibition is considered as the unit of meaning in the art world, the scope for ambiguity is also the scope for institutional change. This shift from the artefact to the exhibition better allows us to account for the advent of avant-garde practices by enabling institutional theory to treat of institutional change and re-evaluation.

Nowhere is the idea that the exhibition is the limit of the concept of what counts as art better expressed than in Robert Barry's work entitled *during the exhibition, the gallery will be closed*. Here, every element of the art world (as embodied in the gallery) can be discarded, yet the exhibition remains. It is in this context of playing with what can be in an exhibition and how an exhibition can be staged that the movement from graffiti to street art makes sense.

Like graffiti, the prospect of installation art has seen a recent flourishing in the idea of what an exhibition can be. Here, we find an ever-increased emphasis on site-specificity, trans-nationality, trans-disciplinarity, intersectionality, temporality, etc. Exhibitions are increasingly *ad hoc* projects that are valued for their ability to move across boundaries, these being physical or theoretical.

At one end of the scale of institutional incorporation we can find the example of what I call a graffiti gallery, and at the other we find *The Grand Tour*. In June 2007, the National Gallery at Trafalgar Square in London had life-size waterproof vinyl reproductions of some of its most famous paintings (including the works of John Constable and Leonardo da Vinci) displayed on the streets of central London. The exhibition was called *The Grand Tour* and ran for twelve weeks in the West End. This exhibition demonstrates the degree to which the established art world is consumed with a passion for the alternative approaches to exhibiting that graffiti offers. Another example is the *Street and Studio* exhibition held in the Tate Modern in London in the summer of 2008. Here graffiti artists were invited to decorate the exterior walls of the museum. These exhibitions succeed insofar as they challenge preconceptions of what an exhibition can be. However, they also mark an increased monitoring of the visual landscape of the urban space.

As a result, we are presented with the reality of legitimate vandalism. For the most part the type of work that attains gallery approval is complex and far removed from the natural occurrence of graffiti on the street. Rarely, for example, are the initial and rudimentary signatures ('tags') of graffiti writers presented in galleries. Instead more physical and pictorial works, such as stencil work and woodblocks, are showcased by galleries. The implication of this development is that the works associated with the formal art world are to be still considered

as art, whereas the simple 'tag' often remains beyond the limit of acceptability. After all, the simple act of tagging is the instinct that the surveillance of gallery works seeks to prevent.

In practice, we can see that such curating and artistic activity does not exist beyond the capitalist infrastructure that marks the institutionalised art world. Rather, it currently operates an avant-garde movement, and like all avant-garde movements, it becomes the dominant mode of artistic appreciation (that is to say the institutional mode). What does, then, characterise this approach in its institutional and economic manifestation?

The institutional aesthetic, when based on the exhibition, partly makes a commodity of the ambiguity. The artist can now engage the immaterial in their work for economic reasons. The curator/artist is a new agent in the art world. Or better yet, a new worker in the art world. So much of what makes an artist successful is also what makes a curator successful. This is now removed from the object that they can afford to trade in terms of their immaterial labour.

Maurizio Lazzarato has developed the concept of immaterial labour, albeit not in relation to the art world, which he defines as 'the labour that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity.' (Lazzarato, 1996, p. 132) While the informational aspect refers to a new, digitised nature of labour and specifically to the way the average industrial worker has become intellectualised by their new interface based activities, the cultural aspect refers to "the kinds of activities involved in defining and fixing cultural and artistic standards, fashions, tastes, consumer norms, and more strategically, public opinion.' (Lazzarato, 1996, p. 132) In other words, the labour of the curator is an economic labour even if it does not produce a material output. Here we can see that, in the context of this economic model, exhibitions are the commodity that frames the identity and the meaning of art. Exhibitions enable the trade of such labour.

In the ambiguous art exhibition and the accompanying merging of the artist and the curator, we see a new phenomenology of labour. No longer is that final documentable material piece vital but rather the situation and atmosphere will suffice as an economic good. By arriving at this account of the avant-garde through ambiguous exhibiting, as seen in the case of graffiti as installation art, we notice that instead of communicating art, the task of the artist is the task of the curator, namely, the facilitation of critical exchange. For Lazzarato, this mantra is 'become subjects'. The production process for the artist is thus no longer concerned with the artefact but with the generation of subjectivity (clearly a much more ambiguous goal). Again, it is worth remembering the words of Bishop: 'Installation art presupposes an *embodied* viewer' (Bishop, 2005, p. 6). In so doing installation art, or better yet the exhibition as a unit of meaning,

presupposes the embodied subjectivity of the person who experiences art and a new economic model for the art world. Here the product is constructed as something that is living and active and open to multiple engagements.

To conclude: that installation art, as seen in the case of graffiti as street art, signals a new economic framework for the art world. This is a framework that thrives on the ambiguity inherent in the revised implications of 'exhibition' to give the art world a feel of *shinhatsubai* (that is the feel of something new, improved and now on sale). However, this does not mean that a new, extraordinary mode of critical engagement is sweeping the art world. While the merging of the roles of the artist and the curator and the increased focus on activated spectatorship could be seen as the triumph of the avant-garde, they can also be used by the institutional apparatus of the art world in order to control installation art, graffiti etc. Here the co-optation of graffiti, as seen in *The Grand Tour* and beyond, is striking. No doubt, what we see in the acceptance of the interactive as art is but another stage in the increased documentation of the visual world beyond the traditional art institution by the art world. What such developments suggest is that the relationship between what is not included in the category of 'art' has at all times the nature of a game that is always institutional. Between the two, vandalism and fine art for example, exists the ambiguous exhibition that enables institutional change and re-evaluation.

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