

Institutional critique-by-numbers

A reply to Esther Leslie

What would count as an effective ‘institutional critique’ of Tate Modern? If it is, as one says, a new kind of art museum, we need to ask what new strategies it uses to organize knowledge and experience, and what forces shape those strategies. So far these questions have not been properly addressed. Esther Leslie’s ‘Tate Modern: A Year of Sweet Success’ (*RP* 109) is cheery, knockabout stuff, but it shows how institutional critique can miss the point. The two main moves are the obligatory critique of commercialism and criticism of the way in which history is represented. Leslie points to the on-line shopping, the proposed e-business link up, the re-branding as ‘Tate’, and so on. Actually, it is less a critique than a slur: Tate is found to be a bit vulgar, a bit trade, rather petty bourgeois. This is supported by the hackneyed likening of Tate Modern to a theme park, on the basis that there are crowds and a shop. The critique of the way in which history is represented involves criticism of the kind of information provided by captions (not enough about economic conditions of production), and some odd allegations about a kind of insidious belittling of modern British art.

Leslie’s main observation is that Tate Modern ‘remakes the space of cultural encounter’, staging a ‘more casualized relationship between viewer and artworks’. She thinks that this is due to the insubstantial nature of both the gallery and the art it shows, and that this lack of substance is an effect of an alliance between commercialization and aestheticism (rendered here as ‘decontextualized formalism’). The gallery ‘showcases but does not think through the implications of much avant-garde practice of the last eighty years’; namely, ‘the challenges of Dadaesque anti-art and the post-war movements of Fluxus and mail art, conceptualism and Land Art’. The primary implication of these practices is, I suppose, that substantial art is that which incorporates a double critique of commodification and aesthetics. Leslie thinks that Tate Modern fails to ‘think through’ the lesson of this practice because all the works, even the anti-art ones, are contained in the (now commercialized) space of (aesthetic) art.

For a while now, this kind of critique has had its own artist-hero: Hans Haacke. He reappears in Leslie’s piece. If only his influence had been allowed to fill the gallery, she feels, then some substantial work might have been done. The exemplary hero is a very particular Haacke. He is not the Hans Haacke who angrily but beautifully jack-hammered the marble floor of the German Pavilion at the 1993 Venice Biennale, remaking, so it seemed, Friedrich’s intensely, affectingly, political *The Sea of Ice* (1823–24). No, Leslie’s Haacke is Haacke-the-lecturer who ‘exposed the links between [the corporate world and the gallery system] in terms of sponsorship, patronage, ownership, with art as the kid-glove, civilizing face of business’ – for instance, in tracing the provenance of paintings by Manet and Seurat. Following this example, the Tate Modern captions might have revealed the acts of patronage that are the basis of the Tate collection. We should know who donated what in lieu of tax and which business, with what dealings, financed the whole place and everything in it. Instead, Leslie writes, we have ‘decontextualized formalism ... today’s paint-by-numbers of art appreciation’.

Leslie's recourse to Haacke-the-lecturer reveals the limitations of her perspective. The problem with her institutional critique (aside from the economic determinism) is the mutually justifying link between an insensate genre of art theory and an anti-aesthetic art practice. This fails because the critique never touches its object: the art institution *as such*. The practice of Haacke-the-lecturer does not embody institutional critique *as art* but only as critique. Nowadays, Haacke-the-lecturer only exists to assure the anti-aesthetic critic that she has an anchor in art practice; that is, a practical reflection of her own critique which justifies that critique as being substantially about art. But really it just *is* her critique. Some kind of aesthetics is needed. The Dadaist tradition is an art, not an anti-art, tradition. We make judgements that are, in some sense, aesthetic about the work of Duchamp, Buren and Broodthaers, for example, and also Haacke's *Germania*.

The path to institutional critique must take a different route. If the economic base is your thing, start from the fact that The Tate Gallery (which is, I notice, rather than the brand name 'Tate', the organization named on my pay-slips) is the largest recipient of public arts funding in this country. More importantly, perhaps, it *operates* primarily as a state institution and not as a commercial one. You can then ask what performance criteria the state sets for the spending of public money, and so discover a powerful tendency towards making the provision of culture more democratic. The next thing is to question the policy-makers' power-free conception of democratic culture as a frictionless space of shared values and equal exchanges among a community of friends. After that, look for the ways in which such principles are manifest in the museum's programme; and here find that precisely in order to reconcile itself with state prescriptions, the Tate Gallery conceives art projects that, as strategies, owe everything to the tradition of institutional critique. It is among these projects, and not the displays of aesthetic objects in the galleries, that we find the most insubstantial elements in the Tate programme: the plural histories of *Century City*, community relations projects like Mark Dion's *Tate Thames Dig*, and Anna Best's *Wedding Party*, the *Mongrel* website, and the Critical Interventions series.

If Tate Modern is a new kind of space, its newness is a consequence of a certain state-led democratization. It seems to me that one of cultural criticism's main tasks must be to imagine more fully democratic alternatives, to the particular, highly attenuated type of democratization that is taking place. This will involve rethinking the old emphasis on the commodification of culture, and recognizing how orthodox institutional critique is implicated in some of the institution's most impoverished processes. It will also involve working out the place of aesthetic experience, or more generally of reflective judgement, in any alternative, democratic cultural policy.

Dominic Willsdon

Curator of Public Events, Tate Modern

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