

## THE NEW INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE AND THE CONTESTATION OF THE MUSEUM'S ROLE IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

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L'inizio del XXI secolo è stato un momento di straordinaria rinascita per l'attivismo artistico. È in questo periodo che numerosi collettivi come *Occupy Museums*, *Liberate Tate*, *The Natural History Museums*, *Decolonize This Place*, *Not an Alternative*, *Mi Riconosci?*, *Sale Docks*, *Awi*, *Macao*, *Ex Asilo Filangeri* e *Ctrl-I*, hanno tentato di evidenziare la complicità nel perpetuare, nascondere o trascurare pratiche ingiuste e oppressive all'interno delle istituzioni museali. A partire dalle esperienze della Critica Istituzionale e dei movimenti attivisti contemporanei, il presente lavoro traccia l'evoluzione storica dell'attivismo artistico e approfondisce l'impatto che il movimento degli attivisti sta avendo nel dibattito istituzionale su accessibilità e inclusione nei musei.

*The beginning of the 21st century has been an extraordinary period for art activism. Activist museums, such as Occupy Museums, Liberate Tate, The Natural History Museum's Decolonize This Place, Not an Alternative, Mi Riconosci?, Sale Docks, Awi, Macao, Ex Asilo Filangeri and Ctrl-I, have held art institutions accountable for the washing of art and the perpetuation of discriminatory practices and narratives. As a result, museums are now considered emblematic actors in the power network of global capitalism. The methodology developed aims to produce new ways of shaping knowledge and interpretation of art activism and to reflect on the essential questions raised by activist museums regarding sustainability and inclusion in museums. Starting with an analysis of the experiences of Institutional Critique and the practices adopted by activist museums, the article traces the historical evolution of art activism and explores the impact and role played by art activism in the rethinking of museums within the institutional debate.*

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## INTRODUCTION

If museums want to continue to have place, they must stop seeing activists as antagonists.  
They must position themselves as learning centers, not impenetrable centers of self-validating  
authority<sup>1</sup>.

The past decade has witnessed an intense politicization of the art system, with high-profile artists, curators, and critics becoming increasingly involved in political issues.

This politicization has led to a crisis of legitimacy for major cultural institutions, to the extent that museums, galleries, and biennials have been the subject of protests regarding their manner and purpose of governance. The beginning of the 21st century was also marked by an extraordinary renaissance of art activism. During this period, numerous collectives, such as *Occupy Museums*, *Liberate Tate*, *The Natural History Museums*, *Decolonize This Place*, *Not an Alternative*, *Sale Docks*, *Mi Riconosci?* and *Ctrl-I*, attempted to highlight the complicity of institutions in perpetuating, concealing, or neglecting unjust and oppressive practices. This infrastructural turn<sup>2</sup> by activist movements is supported, in part, by the principle that art is not autonomous from the economic systems, ideological apparatuses, and institutional spaces within which it is produced, presented and disseminated. By making frequent use of the architectural spaces and branding of institutions, the strategies employed by activist movements, such as petitions, strikes, and occupations, aim to use the visibility of museums to hold institutional actors accountable and demand their commitment. This places museums under a double attack on the one hand, their authority as guardians of cultural value was challenged; on the other hand, the prestige of the institutions in question has been valuable in exploiting the visibility and pressure related to political movements.

Art historian Yates McKee has described a general *strike-art*<sup>3</sup> impulse in the last decade, involving actions that tactically advance between the world of social movements and the infrastructure of the art system. All of these movements differ from each other in terms of tactics, aesthetics, and political goals, but in all cases, there is a shared desire to decolonize the museum, decentralize authority, and increase accountability of the museum institution.

Activist art has risen so rapidly that artist Peter Weibel suggests that: «it may be the first new art form of the twenty-first century<sup>4</sup>» while theorist Boris Groys insists that art activism is: «an entirely new phenomenon<sup>5</sup>». In contrast, U.S. activist and writer Gregory Sholette opens his latest book *The Art of Activism and the Activism of Art* by arguing that it is possible to reconstruct and trace a genealogy of art activism, tracing the emergence of art as activism to the political radicalism of the late 1960s<sup>6</sup>. Following Sholette's proposal, it is possible to observe that, like all cultural phenomena, activism is shaped by events and practices that preceded it, even when practitioners unknowingly borrow or reuse its archival resources. Sholette refers to this archive as a *Phantom Archive*, meaning: «the vast array of materials, with their underlying codes, that have been fashioned by art activists but largely omitted from the art historical record<sup>7</sup>» the ac-

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1. VISO 2018.

2. MTL COLLECTIVE 2018, pp. 193-227.

3. MCKEE 2016, pp. 89-93.

4. WEIBEL 2015.

5. GROYS 2014, pp. 1-14

6. SHOLETTE 2022, p. 18.

7. SHOLETTE 2022, p. 7.

cessibility of which requires speculative processes of recovery, rearrangement and reactivation, as opposed to the more usual art historical methods involving the formal, iconographic or biographical attributes of an artwork, movement or artist.

Overall, the resurgence of activism in recent years has aimed to change the behavior of arts institutions in light of their stated commitments to civic education. However, these practices go far beyond the call of Holland Cotter, who in his article *Make museums moral again*<sup>8</sup> proposes to restore a set of core values, now distorted, by improving the governance of current institutions<sup>9</sup>. Indeed, activist movements have not been afraid to challenge institutions, often creating decision-making dilemmas for institutional governance. Such work is not limited to acts of denial or censorship; rather it involves what Kuba Szreder calls *Productive Withdrawals* from the business of the art system<sup>10</sup>.

How does our relationship and interaction with museum institutions change in this context? Through an analysis of contemporary activist movements that have directly confronted institutions, I will attempt to answer this question and understand the impact of the activist movement on the institutional debate on accessibility and inclusion in museums.

### MUSEOLOGY OF CONTESTATION: THE FIRST WAVE OF INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE

The questioning of the role of the contemporary art institution and its need to perform a social function is only the most recent outcome of the contestation that has been taking place within the field of museological studies since the 1960s when Duncan Ferguson Cameron opened the debate on redefining the role of the museum in his famous essay *The Museum: A Temple or the Forum*<sup>11</sup>. From these years onward, the need for reform became increasingly evident, with the aim of granting museums a broader social function that could provide equal access to culture. The drives for cultural democratization that were underway in those years could have found acceptance and constructive space for discussion precisely within the museum. The hope was to create exhibition spaces and meeting places that were open to all. It was within the climate of the democratic drives of the 1960s and the structuralist philosophy of conceptual art that the first wave of Institutional Critique developed. In dialogue-contrast with the artistic production of Minimalism and interested in investigating the ontological questions of the artwork, such as its underlying structures of thought and the space in which it operates, Institutional Critique employs a critical voice by working on the physicality of the art institution and the reception of the artwork. This includes both strictly perceptual and sociological terms. The richness of the debate was recently witnessed in the voluminous anthology edited by Alexander Alberro, titled *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists Writings*<sup>12</sup>.

The anthology brings together a range of writings by artists and art historians who have made history within this movement, such as Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, the Art Workers Coalition, Hans Haacke, Michael Asher, Andrea Fraser, and Mel Ramsden. The term 'Insti-

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8. COTTER 2016.

9. BURTON - JACKSON - WILLSDON 2016, p. 310.

10. SZREDER 2017.

11. CAMERON 1971, pp. 11-24.

12. ALBERRO - SMITSON 2011.

tutional Critique' was first used by Mel Ramsden in his 1975 essay *On Practice*<sup>13</sup>. It was used to describe a politicized art practice that emerged in the late 1960s. Institutional Critique identifies with those artists who have made the object of their art a critique of the institutions that dominate the art system. They denounce the false neutrality of these institutions.

As a result, the museum is viewed as a permanent site for the manifestation of power. This manifestation is developed through a rhetoric of a unique project and managed from above, which denies any possibility of otherness.

Artist criticism has taken various forms over time, including boycotting performances, organizing public meetings and sit-ins, performance actions, and other demonstrations aimed at radically transforming dominant art institutions.

Emerging from this ferment were a set of self-organized groups, including the *Art Workers Coalition (AWC)*, *Grupo de Artistas de Vanguardia*, and the *Black Emergency Cultural Coalition*. Their goal was a total break with the institution to make art politically effective. Their demands ranged from democratization in terms of governance, accessibility, race, class, and gender inequalities to the redistribution of resources within the art world.

Smaller groups also emerged during this period, including the *Ad Hoc Women's Art Committee*, *Black Women Students* and *Artists for Black Art Liberation*. These associations, while making specific demands on the institutions in question, also intersected with broader political movements of the time, including anti-war, black and women's liberation movements. As Sholette recalls, despite the fickle nature of these movements, the 1960s remains a period of utmost importance for the history of activism in art:

Most of these informally organized cultural associations faded within a year or two of their founding, but when considered together we can begin to gauge the precipitous outgrowth of art activism that emerged in the 1960s as an expansion that, despite transformations and patches of relative stagnancy, continues to this day. In any case, the 1960s marks the emergence of a dissident cultural paradigm within contemporary art<sup>14</sup>.

From this period onward, it became crucial to denounce the art institution, especially the museum, as a deeply problematic field. Artists and activists sought to make evident the intersections where political, economic, and ideological interests directly intervened and interfered in the production of public culture. Simultaneously, Institutional Critique calls for a critical reassessment of what the museum has represented since its inception: a democratic place where knowledge, memory, cultural-historical consciousness, and, above all, education were formed. By highlighting this transformation, Institutional Critique seeks to challenge the dominant narrative that portrays the museum as an inherently neutral and democratic institution, while also advocating for a return to its original mission of fostering education and cultural exchange for all.

## MUSEOLOGY OF CONTESTATION: THE SECOND WAVE OF INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE

If the artists of the first generation of Institutional Critique moved from strictly phenomenological problematics that included the dynamics of perception, space, and architecture within the art institution, toward a concern for the ideological structures of the institution itself, the next wave of Institutional Critique, beginning in the late 1970s, on the other hand, fit into a

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13. RAMSDEN 1975.

14. SHOLETTE 2022, p. 46.

historical moment that converged with the elaboration, within the critical debate, of the concept of post-modernism and addressed the issue of cultural production in the late capitalist age. As suggested by Sholette:

The 1980s is a key turning point not only for activist art or contemporary high culture but for Western-style capitalist societies across the planet. In particular, the 1980s also signaled that an intensified phase of spectacularization was evolving thanks to the virtually unopposed ascendancy of global capital in its resurrected, laissez-faire incarnation, aka neoliberalism<sup>15</sup>.

These conditions created new tensions and contradictions in the relationship between labor and capital. This impacted the action of political radicalism, giving rise to a new kind of counter-institutional activism known as *Tactical Media*.

In 1997 David Garcia and Geert Lovink wrote *The ABC of Tactical Media*, a short text that became something very much like a *Tactical Media* (TM) manifesto.

*Tactical Media* takes the form of an approach that uses communication technologies and guerrilla media strategies to implement actions of protest, criticism, and contestation through the media. In the foreword to the manifesto, Garcia and Lovink state:

*Tactical Media* are what happens when the cheap 'do it yourself' media, made possible by the revolution in consumer electronics and expanded forms of distribution (from public access cable to the internet), are exploited by groups and individuals who feel aggrieved by or excluded from the wider culture<sup>16</sup>.

Seeking to radically reimagine cultural politics after 1968, TM aims to critique neoliberal economic policies and global inequalities by occupying and subverting the electronic medium's message. The practices adopted by TM draw on a neo-situationist aesthetic that favors agile and immediate tactics rather than long-term strategic planning.

An exemplary interventionist project carried out in 2003 was by the activist group *The Yes Men* (Igor Vamos and Jacques Servin). The approach taken by the two activists was to create a fake Dow Chemical Company website and speak on the company's behalf. The Dow Chemical Company had purchased Union Carbide, the company responsible for one of the biggest industrial disasters in history, the 1984 Bhopal catastrophe<sup>17</sup>. Despite this, Dow Chemical refused to take responsibility for the disaster or compensate its survivors. A few months after the creation of the fake *DowEthics.com* website, the two activists received an email from a BBC World Television reporter requesting an interview with a company representative to

discuss Dow's position on the 1984 Bhopal tragedy. The interview was scheduled to take place on December 3rd, the day that marked the 20th anniversary of the Bhopal disaster. Thanks to this audacious détournement, Servin managed to arrive at the BBC recording session under the false name of Jude Finisterra, the spokesman for the Dow Chemical Company. Broadcasting to millions of viewers, Finisterra announced that the U.S. company would provide unprecedented compensation to survivors and victims' families. After the intervention, Dow Chemical's stock

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15. SHOLETTE 2022, p. 73.

16. Cfr. GARCIA - LOVINK 1997.

17. The Bhopal disaster was an industrial accident that occurred on December 3, 1984, at a chemical plant owned by the multinational company Union Caribe, located in the city of Bhopal in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh. The event involved the release into the atmosphere of about 40 tons of methyl isocyanate (MIC) vapors, an extremely toxic compound that causes irreversible damage to organisms. More than two thousand people died the very night of the disaster while the number of victims who died from the effects of the poisoning over the following months and years is estimated to be in the tens of thousands.

lost about \$2 billion in value before the *Yes Men* were exposed for their hijacking, leaving the company's true corporate spokesmen in the uncomfortable position of having to publicly declare that they would not provide justice to the injured people of Bhopal.

In addition to creating fictitious identities (between the early 1990s and 2021, Igor Vamos and Jacques Servin changed identities several times to practice what they call *identity correction*)<sup>18</sup> TM's activities included inventing fake institutions. These institutions were referred to as *faux institutions* by Belarusian artist Marina Naprushkina, *para-fictional institutions* by Carrie Lambert-Beatty, and *mockstitutions* by Gregory Sholette which served as command posts for situationist-inspired activism<sup>19</sup>.

By creating these fictional structures, along with the impersonation of various avatars, TM sought to conquer non-institutional spaces of action using strategic tools. In general, tactical media activist movements sought to use communication techniques and creative appropriation to create spaces for critique, reflection, and mobilization against dominant forms of power through the use of new digital media. However, in the late 1990s, the accessibility of both urban streets and cyberspace began to shrink as local processes of gentrification and national and international systems of regulation and surveillance weakened TM's practice of making politically motivated aesthetic interventions. What conditions prevail today, then, during what we might tentatively call an extension of the second wave of Institutional Critique?

## ACTIVIST ART: CONTEMPORARY INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE

As art curator Marco Scotini states:

The role that contemporary art plays as a global player in the new world order and the geographical expansion of the art world during the crisis of the contemporary spatial order are just two of the main consequences of the neoliberal economy<sup>20</sup>.

As accurately outlined in his book *Utopian Display - Geopolitical Curating*, a collection of writings that seeks to interrogate the role of contemporary art in society, the author discusses how the proliferation of art biennials and museums around the world over the past three decades has legitimized and culturally promoted globalization. This has allowed, on the one hand, artists and cultures that were once on the periphery of dominant art narratives to gain global visibility and to access the Western matrix system as active participants. At the same time, however, the text highlights the persistence of a modernist conception of art, which still characterizes art as a cultural category that is associated with whiteness, masculinity, imperialism, and bourgeois values, despite attempts at institutional inclusiveness. Picking up Scotini's words again:

Our current model of art resembles that of a majoritarian institution that can either integrate minorities on its own terms (within a predetermined identity) or exclude them entirely. By adhering to this model, we are accepting a totalitarian distribution of power, promoting the notion that only one worldview is possible, and discouraging diversity and proliferation of different voices and perspectives. In this sense, when viewed on a global scale, art still relies on autonomy and a-historicity, perpetuating the classical integration-exclusion dialectic<sup>21</sup>.

18. SHOLETTE 2022, p. 84.

19. SHOLETTE 2022, p. 93.

20. SCOTINI 2019, p. 13.

21. SCOTINI 2019, p. 15.

Despite progress, institutions still struggle to accommodate social demands and view debate and confrontation as essential components of the artistic process. As a result, there is increasing pressure to challenge the neoliberal mechanisms that govern the operations of Western museums and art institutions.

In Italy, a collective that has sought and still carries out militant criticism to counter neoliberal processes within artistic institutions is the activist space *Sale Docks*, located in Venice. It was established in 2007 through the occupation of an old warehouse, which is part of the Magazzini del Sale complex situated between Zattere and Punta della Dogana, built in the fifteenth century and extensively renovated in the nineteenth century.

The first group of occupiers of *Sale Docks* - who would later form the assembly, the sovereign body of the project - was composed of activists from social centers, university students, cultural workers, and artists. As Marco Baravalle, one of the founders of the space, states:

The aim of *Sale Docks*, pursued through collective action, is to provide a tangible alternative to the neoliberal model of cultural valorization in a city like Venice, characterized by privatization, real estate speculation, and the decline of communal production spaces. In order to achieve this, Sale Docks endeavors to activate dynamic and interdisciplinary cultural practices within the urban environment<sup>22</sup>.

A good example of such practice was the project *Open#6*, whose first edition dates back to 2009. The project aimed to develop a critique of the neoliberal artistic recipe by choosing to subvert the format through which it operates, namely that of the exhibition. The decision to subvert the exhibition format in *Open#6* also included the choice not to establish the duration of the exhibition in advance, allowing the process the time it needed. Furthermore, the main objective was to work together, involving around 130 university students and artists, to create a collective exhibition capable of revealing contradictions and promoting dissent instead of reinforcing consensus. To achieve this goal, the members of the *Sale Docks* assembly proposed an initial workshop to the participants. The purpose of this workshop was to reflect on the peculiarities of the cultural production sector in Venice, with the aim of immediately breaking down disciplinary divisions. From the second meeting onwards, a general working methodology was adopted: participants were divided into small groups, each tasked with compiling a series of words that described the opportunities and challenges for artistic and cultural work in the city. The following words emerged: home, environment, cultural work, education, and relationships. In the months leading up to the actual exhibition opening, the working groups embarked on various activities and projects. One of the most interesting projects within *Open#6* was “The Cultural Mediator’s Manifesto” a figure provided by the University of Venice for the city’s exhibitions (often free of charge, in exchange for recognized educational credits). Some students participating in *Open#6*, who were former cultural mediators, wrote a manifesto focusing on the unmet rights of this specific position, including a minimum wage and the need for real educational impact derived from the experience. *Open#6*, along with other projects carried out by *Sale Docks*, represent virtuous models today of the creative power of social cooperation.

In Spain, around the same years, the activist collective *Ctrl-I* emerged as a direct response to a previous event at MACBA, “El Precariat Social Rebel”, where, under the auspices of the activist network *The Chainworkers*, they expressed their opposition to the questionable employment practices of the museum. In the preamble to the manifesto, the movement declares:

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22. BARAVALLE 2021, p. 89.

We are *Ctrl-i*, a group of people with a clear intention: inform. This collective has been created from one of those many situations of labour precarity on which Barcelona's cultural life is nowadays based. Those situations where creation, treatment and transmission of information become a main source of production and power<sup>23</sup>.

In 2006, the Barcelona Museum of Contemporary Art (MACBA), a leading progressive art institution, hosted the second installment of *Another Relationality*.<sup>24</sup> The project consisted of lectures and workshops aimed at exploring the legacy of Institutional Critique and the evolving social and political roles of art within the context of radical reformism. Just prior to a related seminar they were invited to attend, the local activist collective *Ctrl-i* released a public statement announcing their withdrawal from the event. They accused the museum of being complicit with the very neo-liberal imperatives it purported to criticize. Their statement read as follows: «talking about precariousness in the MACBA is like a nutrition seminar at McDonald's<sup>25</sup>». However, it is important to note that *Ctrl-i* includes some members who were previously temporary workers at the museum. Their knowledge of the precarious working conditions within the institution forms a crucial part of their contribution. This is a telling example of a larger trend that Sholette analyzes:

50-some years after it was introduced, the concept of institutional critique may be coming home to roost. Only this time, the critique is spreading amongst those tasked with literally keeping the museum running. Unlike institutionally critical artists, these are the essential cultural workers who operate invisibly within plain sight [...]. If this is indeed a return of institutional critique, then it is applying art historical lessons in a truly novel way. Rather than creating exhibitible projects that aesthetically deconstruct museum spaces or that peel back high culture's ideological facade the contemporary activist art variant seeks to directly transform the material circumstances of the museum industry's internal operations, including the fate of those whose precarious 'dark matter' agency reproduces the logic of the art world itself<sup>26</sup>.

## INSTITUTIONS OF EXODUS

As a result, the artistic strategies of the new Institutional Critique became increasingly complex, involving politically motivated departures from conventional art institutions and engagement with social movements. The critics Raunig and Ray argued that these actions represented a form of engagement between the artistic and activist communities, rather than a simple *antiart* gesture<sup>27</sup>. They called this approach *institutional practices*, which involved rethinking Institutional Critique through the framework of Foucault's later ideas on governmentality. In Foucault's view, critique becomes an activity that is connected to novel forms of behavior and exercises of power by the governed. These activities might entail the rearrangement of power relations within an institution to significantly alter its governance, or they may involve the creation of new institutional forms. Foucault is present in Raunig's work, which primarily explores the tension between the institution as a dynamic event where new arrangements of force are positioned and as an established entity that consolidates and reproduces these arrangements over time. For the art critic, the new wave of Institutional Critique operates precisely within this tension between dynamic action and the establishment of enduring structures. However, the analysis of

23. Cfr. online al link [https://sindominio.net/ctrl-i/invert\\_and\\_subvert.html](https://sindominio.net/ctrl-i/invert_and_subvert.html)

24. Cfr. online al link <https://www.macba.cat/en/exhibitions-activities/activities/another-relationality-rethinking-art-experience>

25. CTRL-I 2006.

26. SHOLETTE 2022, pp. 108-109.

27. RAUNIG - RAY 2009.



this phenomenon tends to be more theoretical than empirical; the example he uses to support his argument refers to the attitude of contemporary artists who sought to embed themselves within the self-managed social centers in cities such as Amsterdam, Barcelona, and Athens in the 2000s. These centers were often housed in occupied or expropriated buildings, serving as communal kitchens, multimedia labs, or organizing centers. Some of these spaces were under constant siege by the police, while others received legal recognition and even public funding through progressive policies. Some were connected to larger art ecosystems, while others remained separate from them. However, these spaces were considered institutional since they were founded and governed by their own participants, with the goal of building and sustaining radical social movements. An example of such spaces was *16 Beaver*, located in one of the few surviving industrial buildings in the Wall Street district of Lower Manhattan. It sustained itself through a rent-sharing agreement with several other organizations and was operated as a communal movement, hosting a diverse array of artists, intellectuals, and activists from around the city and the world between 2000 and 2015.

Although many of its participants maintained connections with the institutional worlds of art and academia, *16 Beaver* remained independent of those worlds. In the summer of 2011, it became an incubator for the *Occupy Wall Street* movement, forging a historic intersection between the energies of the 2011 uprisings around the world and the network of artists, activists, and intellectuals that *16 Beaver* had cultivated in New York for over a decade. *Occupy* represented one of the most extreme examples of exodus from the art system in recent years, giving rise to an entirely different set of institutional practices that were distinct from the art world and motivated by the imperatives of anti-capitalist movement building. As Sholette notes:

*Occupy Wall Street* (OWS), with substantial encampments in Washington, D.C., Boston, Chicago, Oakland, Portland and many smaller cities – established itself as counter-cultural shantytowns overflowing with impromptu, anti-capitalist speeches, DIY music, dance and art, improvised messages scrawled on the back of pizza delivery boxes, a people's library (in Zuccotti Park) and a reverberating, non-electronic, person-to-person voice-amplification system known as the 'human mic'. This new generation of activist occupiers put their bodies 'on the line' while also taking advantage of Wi-Fi and cellular networks by employing digital services like Twitter and Facebook – technologies that had not been available to counter – globalization demonstrators in Seattle and elsewhere just over a decade earlier. They seamlessly embodied and livestreamed their occupation via both real and virtual space<sup>28</sup>.

Writing about *Occupy* in late 2011, Fraser remained skeptical of extra-artistic claims made by artists. However, instead of dismissing them outright, she saw the immanence of artists in the art system as a political opportunity. Fraser now states:

Any claim that we represent a progressive social force while our activities are directly subsidized by the engines of inequality can only contribute to the justification of that inequality - the (not so) new legitimation function of art museums. The only 'alternative' today is to recognize our participation in that economy and confront it in a direct and immediate way in all of our institutions<sup>29</sup>.

Fraser's call to combine an immanent critique of the art system with confrontational action echoed the emerging *Gulf Labor Coalition*. Formed in 2010 by artists such as Andrew Ross, Walid Raad, Hans Haacke, Rene Gabri, and Ayreen Anastas, the coalition aimed to pressure the Guggenheim to improve the oppressive working conditions of migrant workers involved

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28. SHOLETTE 2022, p. 102.

29. FRASER 2011, p. 126.

in the construction of its new branch in Abu Dhabi. The branch was situated on the Island of Happiness (Saadiyat) in the United Arab Emirates. The Saadiyat Cultural District includes a branch of the Louvre (opened in November 2017), a branch of Frank Gehry's Guggenheim, Foster + Partners' Sheikh Zayed National Museum, and a performing arts center by Zaha Hadid. Unfortunately, the workers who built Saadiyat Island had no rights to worker representation or any form of collective bargaining. When they organized strikes and slowdowns in response to poor living or non-payment conditions, they were often subjected to harsh punishment, including imprisonment or deportation. *The Gulf Labor Campaign* (GLC) was first conceived in 2010, during the *Home Works Forum* conference hosted by Ashkal Alwan, the Lebanese plastic arts association. After an unsuccessful attempt at dialogue with the Guggenheim, a proposal was made to boycott the Abu Dhabi Guggenheim at the Sharjah Biennale. *The Gulf Labor Campaign* (GLC) initially asked the Guggenheim to ensure that the rights of migrant workers were protected during the construction of the museums on Saadiyat Island.

However, as the Guggenheim refused to improve working conditions, what began as an organized, artist-led boycott, with artists pledging to withhold their works from acquisition by the museum, evolved over time. GLC's tactics evolved to include periodic email updates, publications, public educational programs, and exhibitions (such as participation in the 56th Venice Biennale). They also conducted research trips to the UAE and the home countries of some of the workers in the group. The 52-week tactic was another strategy they employed, which used art and creativity to support the campaign.

As part of the campaign, the 52-week tactic was employed, in which a different artist presented work related to issues surrounding the construction of the Abu Dhabi Guggenheim and the relationship between art and work more generally, each week for 52 weeks. GLC's visibility and impact fluctuated during its first four years, but in 2014, the campaign entered a new phase of global media coverage with a series of actions directed at the Guggenheim. The GLC movement operated in a way that was unforeseen by Raunig in his analysis of the fourth wave of Institutional Critique. Raunig conceived this wave primarily in terms of experimental and small-scale cultural spaces that were largely indifferent to the official art system. Despite emerging from the ferment of *16 Beaver and Occupy*, GLC was now activating the resources of the art system (such as the cultural capital and media visibility of artists) by pressuring the institution with specific demands for accountability.

However, from the standpoint of direct action by the *Global Ultra Luxury Faction* (G.U.L.F) group - an autonomous branch of GLC, known in part for its iconic unauthorized projections on the walls of the Guggenheim in New York - GLC was in danger of falling into the logic of a strictly single-issue campaign. This was due to its lack of success in connecting with other internal struggles in the art world. G.U.L.F's concerns extended beyond conditions on Saadiyat Island. In a manifesto titled *On Direct Action: An Address to Cultural Workers*<sup>30</sup>, G.U.L.F asserted that the struggle around art world institutions, such as the Guggenheim, had to be understood in more general terms, particularly to the «Global ultra-luxury economy, underpinned by empire and white supremacy<sup>31</sup>». This analysis also broadens the meaning in changing political horizons. While not disregarding the specifics of the labor conditions campaign, G.U.L.F advocated a rethinking of art and activism in completely radical terms:

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30. G.U.L.F 2015.

31. G.U.L.F 2015.

THE NEW INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE AND THE CONTESTATION  
OF THE MUSEUM'S ROLE IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

We do not imagine the workers as victims to be saved, but rather as fellow human beings whose freedom is bound up with our own. We have connected with their struggle because our own dignity depends on it. Our liberation is either collective or it is nonexistent<sup>32</sup>.

Following this declaration, G.U.L.F used the Venice Biennale platform to draw a connection between the struggles of migrant workers in Abu Dhabi and those of Palestinians in occupied Palestine. In an unauthorized action, the movement modified the GLC banner hanging at Arsenal by adding the popular cartoon character Handala, a symbol of Palestinian resistance. They also occupied the Israeli pavilion and held a conference on the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) Movement against Israel. A connection that the GLC movement was unable to make because it saw itself as a specific campaign related to working conditions in Abu Dhabi. GLC's limited analytical framework did not allow it to be in explicit solidarity with Palestine.

The tension surrounding G.U.L.F.'s insistence on the *Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions* (BDS) movement made it clear that pressuring elite institutions was not an end in itself for the group, but rather a process towards collective liberation.

We target the Guggenheim in New York because it is a gateway into a larger struggle... From acting, we are learning a new way of thinking. Let each action be an opportunity to test, to train in the practice of freedom. Let us reimagine what art can be as a force of liberation and solidarity across borders<sup>33</sup>.

Learning from GLC's shortcomings, G.U.L.F members met to assess the art world landscape shortly after Venice. In the fall of 2015, the group decided that the decolonial question would serve as a framework for articulating a shared liberation policy while also maintaining the specificities of each struggle.

In Italy, 2011 was not characterized by the explosion of mass movements, as happened, for example, in the previously mentioned cases. However, as Marco Baravalle reminds us in his book *L'autunno caldo del curatore. Arte, neoliberalismo, pandemia*:

Something significant happened precisely on the front of cultural workers. On June 12 and 13, there is a vote for the water referendum, and on June 14, the Teatro Valle in Rome is occupied. About a year later, on May 5, 2012, the *Salé Docks* collective is in Milan to participate in the occupation of the Galfa Tower, the first act of the *Macao* adventure, which will become one of the city's reference points among liberated spaces, animated by art workers and more<sup>34</sup>.

*Macao*, born following the occupation of the Teatro Valle, concluded in 2013, is an independent art center in Milan as part of the Italian art workers movement in response to the financial crisis. For Emanuele Braga, one of the founders, *Macao*:

Has been a workshop experimenting on forms of being together sharing means of production and the centrality of care at the expense of competition. As with many other artists movements, one of the most important research fields of those years was precisely the concept of economics. Partly for a very practical reason: we were all forced to accept "shitty jobs", always anxious to constantly promote ourselves in that very selective and increasingly precarious market. Mutualism was our response. Yet we asked ourselves the question lying at the root of the problem: what do we value<sup>35</sup>?

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32. G.U.L.F 2015.

33. G.U.L.F 2015.

34. BARAVALLE 2021, p. 94.

35. BRAGA 2022, p. 27.

What we value has always remained an open question within *Macao's* community. Consequently, the *Macao* assembly has engaged in ongoing discussions over the years on how to distribute funds in a manner that promotes mutualism among projects, fosters collaboration, and simultaneously acknowledges the value of the significant amount of often unnoticed work. Braga proceeds to provide further clarification: «We tried to reject any centralized evaluation scheme based on ranking systems and revenue models. Instead, as much as possible we tried to link the attribution of value to self-evaluation and community discussion<sup>36</sup>».

Between 2016-2018, in response to an increasing precarization of work and life, the *Macao* community launches an internal experimentation of remunerating activities through a virtual currency called “CommonCoin”. Its design begins a couple of years earlier through the collaboration of various researchers and the Dyne.org Foundation.

How to create an economic space in which the production of value is a collective, indivisible gesture, in which value can be distributed only with the attitude of taking care of the collective and the ecosystem in which one is immersed? The idea was to create a currency that would make its reproduction independent from the capital valorization cycle, capable of breaking free from the logic of the wage relationship to trigger a process of collective re-signification of value. Its subsequent integration with an internal Basic Income within the community aimed to “free time” and make the development of a series of autonomous productive activities more sustainable. Thanks to these experiments, mostly born from the free initiative of artists and bottom-up activists, they tried to use both the technology and the very form of their organization to respond to the precariousness.

*Macao* and *Sale Docks*, together with the *Ex Asilo Filangeri* of Naples (which since 2012 is an open space where a practice of shared and participatory management of a public space dedicated to culture is consolidated, in analogy with civic uses) were born as acts of conflict against the neoliberal transformation of the urban environment and, parallelly, against the neoliberalization of art. They provide virtuous alternatives to the processes of precarization and dequalification of cultural work, while also offering a critical voice that can question the present and contribute to realizing a different future.

## FROM INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE TO INSTITUTIONAL LIBERATION

Holland Cotter viewed the Climate Conference held in Paris at the end of 2015, during which all countries committed to reducing their greenhouse gas emissions, as a momentous turning point for activist movements in the art scene. In December of that year, the art collectives *Occupy Museums*, *Not an Alternative*, and *Liberate Tate* gathered in front of the Louvre in Paris to protest the museum's sponsorship ties with two of the world's largest oil companies. However, the Louvre's performance was just the beginning of the political awakening by activist movements.

Also in 2015, in Italy, this political awakening by activist movements is also represented by the collective *Mi Riconosci?* a national association that focuses on the working conditions of cultural heritage professionals and the modes of reception of historical-artistic heritage. It fights, in particular, against volunteering within the sector, whose unregulated employment fosters a widespread condition of precarity and exploitation. Born as a collective for denouncement, over

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36. BRAGA 2022, p. 31.

the years it has become a reference point for thousands of art workers, a unique phenomenon in Europe in terms of impact and group size. As stated in the book *Mi Riconosci? Sono un professionista dei beni culturali. Oltre la grande bellezza. Il lavoro nel patrimonio culturale italiano* edited by Leonardo Bison and Marina Minniti, two of the movement's founders:

We want to narrate the Italian cultural system in its lesser-known contradictions to the general public, with investigations, analyses, denunciations, and collected testimonies: the fight against unpaid work and gender discrimination, the need for a public cultural heritage that is not submissive to tourism<sup>37</sup>.

*Mi Riconosci?* came to light in 2015, stemming from the intuition of a group of students and young professionals who were then involved in student association activities. From the beginning, the collective set out to highlight how the prevailing cultural system was unsustainable, exclusive, and, above all, that the exploitation of labor was no longer acceptable for those working in cultural heritage. *Mi Riconosci?* was born as a simple campaign on access to cultural heritage professions and the valorization of educational qualifications in the sector. As reported in the book:

What united us was the idea that heritage was not a commodity to be sold or, worse, sold off and that the lack of this awareness had led over time to profit-oriented policies, sacrificing the value of collective consciousness, historical and identity memory, in the name of the 'marketability of cultural products'<sup>38</sup>.

Among the many battles and denunciations carried out by the collective, the most recent one dates back to January 17th. A press conference was held at the Chamber of Deputies in Montecitorio to present the results of *Mi Riconosci's* 2022 investigation on the topic "Working in the cultural sector". The questionnaire was created and launched by the association with the intention of highlighting the main issues affecting the world of culture and its professionals. The presentation took place on the thirtieth anniversary of Law 4/1993, better known as the Ronchey Law, a symbolic choice aimed at emphasizing the negative impact of this legislative text, which can be considered the cornerstone in the decay of the Italian cultural system in the name of alleged innovation. The law introduced additional services for Italian museums (bookshops, cafeterias, audioguides, etc.), which were subsequently further regulated, making their outsourcing mandatory and preventing public administrations from managing them directly. The drift sanctioned by this legislative text has led in subsequent years to the outsourcing of even essential and identity-related museum services, such as ticketing, reception, and education. The same law also introduced the possibility of using volunteers to supplement the staff in state cultural sites. On one hand, this made volunteer associations the primary interlocutors for every public entity (and beyond) in the field of cultural heritage valorization. On the other hand, by introducing unpaid labor, it allowed the outsourcing system to immediately operate towards the lowest possible cost.

Over the years, *Mi Riconosci?* has also been a promoter of many other investigations on labor, including a focus on the period of the pandemic emergency, as well as gender discrimination. It is worth mentioning another survey conducted by *AWI (Art Workers Italia)*, an association established in 2020 with the aim of legitimizing contemporary art workers in Italy. After two years of activity, on March 25, 2022, *AWI* released the first sector survey dedicated to work in the field of contemporary art at a national level. The research results indicate that 85.9% of art

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37. BISON - MINNITI 2021, p. 5.

38. BISON - MINNITI 2021, p. 14.

workers in Italy, mostly born in the 1980s and 1990s, hold a master's degree or higher level of education, with 27.8% obtained abroad. However, despite the high degree of professionalization, the majority of them have precarious contracts and unstable work relationships, little to no protection, and, above all, incomes that are not proportional to the required skills and commitment. Like *Mi Riconosci?*, *AWI* also works towards the recognition and regulation of labor, for a fairer distribution of resources, and to promote accessibility to funding and opportunities.

Considered together and in relation to the other collectives analyzed so far, we will now focus on other activist movements in the contemporary era, primarily engaged in climate justice and decolonization.

One of the leading activist collectives that employs creative intervention for social change is *Liberate Tate*, which was formed to demand an immediate end to the sponsorship relationship between the Tate in London and British Petroleum (BP), an oil company considered responsible for the environmental disaster in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. Over the years, the museum gave the oil company wide public visibility, including through events and exhibitions, such as the *BP Art Exchange program*<sup>39</sup>, in return for sponsorship. Throughout the campaign, the group developed an extensive repertoire of performances, including the unauthorized *License to Spill* action during the *Tate Summer Party* in 2010 and *Time Piece* in 2015, a twenty-five-hour intervention that involved covering the floor of the Tate's Tribune Hall with commentary related to issues concerning art and activism, climate change, and the oil industry. Thanks to demonstrations and performances that criticized the institution's code of ethics, the Tate was sued by a London information court in 2014. The court sided with the activists and required the museum to disclose the amount of donations received by BP over the years. Although the arts and activism organization Platform London estimated the funding to be only 0.5 percent of the museum's total revenue and not deemed necessary for its sustenance, the announcement of the end of the 30-year link with the oil giant did not come until 2016. Both sides of the agreement denied the influence of the protests on the decision. After a five-year campaign, the movement succeeded in pressuring the museum to end its sponsorship agreement with the British oil giant.

However, the museum's distancing of the activists' interventions exposed the imbalance between Tate's democratic intentions, their social potential, and their actual implementation.

Groups such as *The Natural History Museum* are allied with *Liberate Tate* in their call for a fossil-free culture movement, inspired in part by the work of artists Hans Haacke and Mark Dion. The movement, which aims to: «To drop climate science deniers from their boards, cancel sponsorships from the fossil fuel industry, and divest financial portfolios from fossil fuels<sup>40</sup>», is in line with the position expressed by the American Alliance of Museums' Code of Ethics, which states:

It is incumbent on museums to be resources for humankind and in all their activities to foster an informed appreciation of the rich and diverse world we have inherited. It is also incumbent upon them to preserve that inheritance for posterity<sup>41</sup>.

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39. Cfr. online al link <https://www.tate.org.uk/aboutus/projects/bp-art-exchange>

40. LYONS - ECONOMOPOULUS 2015.

41. Cfr. online al link <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/ethics-standards-and-professional-practices/code-of-ethics-for-museum/>

In an open letter addressed to museums, scientists<sup>42</sup>, including several Nobel laureates and senior government officials, called for cutting all ties between museum institutions and the fossil fuel industry. The letter expressed a strong concern that museums' integrity may be compromised when they become involved with those who profit from fossil fuels, such as David Koch.

Koch is a major funder and trustee of the Board of Trustees of the Smithsonian and the American Museum of Natural History, as well as the top executive of the oil and manufacturing conglomerate Koch Industries, a major contributor to greenhouse gas emissions in the United States. Therefore, as the movement claims, it is essential that museums function both as educators and as advocates for a sustainable and equitable future. The movement argues that:

When some of the biggest contributors to climate change and funders of misinformation on climate science sponsor exhibitions in museums of science and natural history, they undermine public confidence in the validity of the institutions responsible for transmitting scientific knowledge. This corporate philanthropy comes at too high a cost<sup>43</sup>.

Trump's election in 2016 provoked a wave of actions within the art system, beginning with the *J20 Art Strike*, which called for "collective noncompliance" aimed at art institutions on Trump's presidential election day. The *Art Strike* was seen as a tactic with the goal of demonstrating dissent against the newly elected president's political stance. According to the organizers of the strike, this was not a revolt against art or cultural institutions, but rather an intervention intended to evolve over time. This would include new protest actions against the president's expressed xenophobic and misogynistic attitudes and closures. The three-month suspension of entry to America from seven Muslim-majority countries (Syria, Libya, Iran, Iraq, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen), known as the *Muslim ban*, generated heated debates. In particular, the *J20* call drew a wide range of responses, from the closure of galleries and museums to the implementation of free entry policies:

We consider Art Strike to be one tactic among others to combat the normalization of Trumpism - a toxic mix of white supremacy, misogyny, xenophobia, militarism, and oligarchic rule. It is an invitation to motivate these activities anew, to reimagine these spaces as places where resistant forms of thinking, seeing, feeling, and acting can be produced. Art Strike is an occasion for public accountability, an opportunity to affirm and enact the values that our cultural institutions claim to embody<sup>44</sup>.

Since Trump's election, campaigns have emerged that draw on the concept of *Philanthropy and Plutocracy*<sup>45</sup>, elaborated by artist Andrea Fraser. These campaigns aim to denounce trusts, accusing them of seeking financial support from patrons or institutions whose values and ideologies are incompatible with those espoused by the museum. This labor alliance led to an early victory with the resignation of Steven Mnuchin, Trump's treasury secretary, from the board of La MoCa Museum (Los Angeles' contemporary art museum).

Other actions have targeted the presence of Trump adviser Larry Fink on the board of the MoMA Museum. In addition, artist Nan Goldin launched a campaign targeting the Sackler family<sup>46</sup>, which made its fortune through the expansion of the opioid industry in the United

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42. Cfr. online al link <http://thenaturalhistorymuseum.org/open-letter-to-museums-from-scientists/>

43. LYONS - ECONOMOPOULUS 2015.

44. Cfr. online al link E-flux, *J20 Art Strike* 2017 <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/90687/j20-art-strike-an-invitation-to-cultural-institutions/>

45. FRASER 2017, pp. 31-38.

46. Laura Poitras's latest documentary, "All the Beauty and the Bloodshed", won the Golden Lion at the 79th Venice Film Festival. The festival was dedicated to artist Nan Goldin, who has fought for years to hold the Sackler

States and whose name appears on dozens of cultural institutions<sup>47</sup>.

In 2018, the activist movement *Decolonize This Place* (DTP), which is active in the New York area, organized an action at the Whitney Museum to protest against Warren B. Kanders, who was not only the vice-chairman of the museum's board of trustees but also a delegate of the arms company Safariland. Kanders' company is one of the world's largest producers of tear gas, which was also used against members of one of the late 2018 migrant caravans at the U.S.-Mexico border. As stated by artist and activist Amin Husain, co-founder of the DTP movement:

We have posters, and we have banners, and we have signs. Put them on your body, put them in your bags. We need to be in that museum to hold it accountable. It is also our museum in this city<sup>48</sup>.

After *Hyperallergic magazine*<sup>49</sup> published an article linking Kanders to the use of tear gas against Mexican asylum seekers, as many as ninety-five museum staff members wrote a letter urging the museum board to demand Kanders' resignation and develop a clear policy on trustee participation. After the incident, the museum's social media accounts were blocked, and the staff was instructed not to speak to the press. Other members of the Whitney's board include Susan K. Hess of the Hess Gasoline Corporation and Nancy Crown, whose family is one of the largest private shareholders in General Dynamics, a defense contractor that is paid to house and process thousands of detained immigrant children. With Kanders, Hess, Crown, and many others still on the board, DTP has announced an escalation campaign in which they hope to make a series of demands that affect the museum's governance arrangements instead of solely pushing for Kanders' resignation. *Decolonize This Place* sees its protests not only as symbolic gestures but as real upheavals of the colonial and capitalist art system. However, DTP differs from many of its peers and predecessors by rejecting the limitations of Institutional Critique and the traditional channels of global art authority. Their actions are planned and implemented without the cooperation of museums, and they threaten the museums' greatest asset: their brand. In fact, they use semi-anonymous collectives and partnerships to self-theorize in major art world magazines (such as *October*) and attempt to trace their artistic and political lineages outside the closed circuit of the mainstream art world.

In their essay *From Institutional Critique to Institutional Liberation? A Decolonial Perspective on the Crises of Contemporary Art*, published in the journal *October*, Husain and Dhillon – two of the movement's leading figures – define *Decolonize This Place* as part of a broader contemporary resurgence of activism aimed at challenging the power structures of art institutions. The movement originated from the union of several associations dedicated to protecting the rights of marginalized social groups who expressed a need for a change in museum narratives and practices, which are still widely considered to be strongly ethnocentric. In the essay, we read:

The principles of institutional critique are being 'pushed to a breaking point and opening onto something radically new and radically old at the same time... The institution must be questioned in its very foundations<sup>50</sup>.

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family accountable for their role in causing thousands of drug overdose deaths. The Sackler family is a powerful multinational corporation.

47. SUTTON 2018.

48. PENNY 2019.

49. WEBER 2018.

50. MTL 2018, pp. 193-227.



In the fall of 2016, at Artists Space in New York City, the organization re-articulated its structure by linking global issues - such as activism for indigenous rights and people of color to the decentralization of white supremacy and patriarchy, the free Palestine movement, de-gentrification, and the global minimum wage for workers.

Therefore, the movement fights for the rights of marginalized communities, often carrying out their actions within cultural institutions and focusing on colonialist tendencies that occur within the art world. In this context, *Decolonize This Place* served as a model for what Fred Moten and Stephen Harney call the *undercommons*<sup>51</sup>, an alternative approach to traditional notions of critique and resistance planning radical forms of sociality and collectivity through collective and self-organized actions that extend and grow outside the institution itself. The path of contemporary subversive movements seems to involve being in the institution, but not of the institution: a fugitive liberation of institutional resources and relations that would otherwise be locked up in official modes of institutional governance. DTP's proposal is a more radical program at the nexus of art and politics, echoing the concept of *institutional liberation* put forward by the *Not an Alternative* movement. This approach challenges the very foundations of art institutions and calls for a fundamental shift in the way they operate. What does institutional liberation mean? Liberation from institutions by whom, how, and for what end? Will this liberation be institutionalized, and embedded within existing institutions, or will it involve a rejection of current institutional practices in favor of a new anti-institutional approach? As Samuel Weber has analyzed, the term 'institution' shares an etymological root with the words 'state', 'statue', and 'system'<sup>52</sup>. This implies that institutions are established, organized, and consolidated in a fixed and enduring place, and tend to reproduce a reified status quo through symbolic rituals of authority, divisions of labor, distribution of resources, and normative forms of conduct<sup>53</sup>. On the other hand, liberation implies the dismantling of fixed power arrangements and suggests freeing people and places from enduring structures and fixed boundaries that are unjust or oppressive.

It is precisely this tension between institutions and liberation that led the *Not an Alternative* movement to call for the liberation of institutions from capitalism. The group writes:

The various projects we see combining into an emergent movement for institutional liberation do not value critique qua critique. They turn the institution against itself, side with its better nature, and force others to take a side<sup>54</sup>.

Rather than a critique of institutions, institutional liberation thus affirms the productive and creative dimension of collective struggle: «Our actions are not simply against. They are for emancipation, equality, collectivity, and the commons. It is the building of counter-power infrastructure<sup>55</sup>». Therefore, *Not an Alternative* views institutional liberation as the ultimate Institutional Critique: a plural and contested art-historical tradition that reduces to a circular ethos of critique for its own sake<sup>56</sup>.

These same characteristics of using the museum as a stage and art as a means to quickly gain visibility are also common among recently born Italian activist movements. Since the beginning

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51. MOTEN - HARNEY 2016.

52. WEBER 1981, p. 25.

53. BOURDIEU 1991, pp. 117-21.

54. NOT AN ALTERNATIVE 2017.

55. NOT AN ALTERNATIVE 2017.

56. SHOLETTE 2016.

of 2022, the activist movement *Ultima Generazione*, gradually succeeding in attracting media attention, has focused its actions on a single demand: an end to all public subsidies for fossil fuels. The collective, rejecting the label of “environmentalists”, has been a prominent participant in numerous demonstrations against climate change, often targeting famous works of art, almost always without causing damage.

From Botticelli’s “Primavera” at the Uffizi to Klimt’s painting in Vienna, the case of attacks on artworks by the *Ultima Generazione* activist movement, which received a response from 92 museum directors worldwide in a letter published on the ICOM website, particularly demonstrates how the debate and clash surrounding the symbolic space of the museum remain absolutely central.

What connects many of these struggles is what McKee, borrowing the term used by David Graeber, describes as *creative resistance*<sup>57</sup>: a political strategy that uses the techniques of artistic creation to spread messages or promote criticism.

Now, art activism seeks to uproot and reimagine not only specific institutional practices, but the totality of high culture’s deeper ideological structure, including its ties to centuries of colonial, patriarchal, heterosexual, and class oppression<sup>58</sup>.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, based on our in-depth experiences, it is possible to infer that institutions do not play an innocent role in this scenario. On the contrary, a necessary condition for museums would be to confront the difficult issues they have deliberately avoided in the past. According to David Fleming, it is time for museums to move beyond mere concern about collections, popularity and the market dictates to create, above all, visions and missions based on key questions, such as: «Why does your museum exist, why do they do what they do, what changes are you trying to effect, what solutions will you generate and what are your non-negotiable values<sup>59</sup>»?

Suay Aksoy, in a recent speech, also states in this regard:

Museums are not neutral. They never have, and never will. They are not separate from their social and historical context. And when it does seem like they are separate, that is not neutrality – that is a choice. Choosing not to address climate change is not neutrality. Choosing not to talk about colonization is not neutrality. Choosing not to advocate for equality is not neutrality. Those are choices, and we can make better ones<sup>60</sup>.

Robert Janes, editor-in-chief of the international journal *Museums Management and Curatorship* aimed at museum professionals and researchers, has also reflected on the issue of institutional neutrality. In *The End of Neutrality: a Modest Manifesto*, Janes clarifies his positions, starting with a statement made for the presentation of INTERCOM 2015 (the International Committee on Management), which read as follows: «Dirty Money: Divestment, Ethical Funding, and Trust. We do not use words like “dirty” in the museum world - we are deferential and

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57. GRAEBER 2002.

58. SHOLETTE 2022, p. 111.

59. JANES 2009, p. 33.

60. AKSOY 2019.

“authoritatively neutral,” or so we believe<sup>61</sup>». Janes’s contribution aims to revisit the concept of neutrality within museum institutions and assess its consequences, starting from his statement presented at INTERCOM. The author’s subsequent reflections are grounded in the questions he asked himself, such as: «Why is neutrality such an entrenched practice within museums? Are museums irrelevant as social institutions<sup>62</sup>»?

Janes argues that as museums become increasingly dependent on private sector sponsorship, claims of neutrality take on an ideological bias that can prevent institutions from reevaluating their own role. According to Janes, the claim of authoritative neutrality is dangerous precisely because it can perpetuate the status quo and impede museums from recognizing their own biases and complicity in systemic issues. Museums are important public spaces for the transmission of knowledge and have the potential to be reliable sources of information. However, the current concern for authoritative neutrality may limit museums’ critical potential to offer historical knowledge and engage in meaningful dialogues with their audiences. Janes argues that integrity could be the antidote to neutrality, and hopes that it can take a prominent place in contemporary museum practice.

This would involve replacing the current practice of impartiality with a reinterpretation of the museum’s role as an institution that can both preserve cultural heritage and offer a critical voice that can interrogate the present and help bring about a different future. It is not surprising, therefore, that the museum, which is meant to be a place of education, and preservation actually serves as a space of social control and a tool of consensus production, rather than remaining impartial.

In conclusion, although activist movements may have different objectives and strategic positioning, a common determinant can be identified when looking at their demonstrations: the desire to express dissent and the need to reappropriate the museum institution. In this regard, in his 2008 essay *The Emancipated Spectator*, Jacques Rancière wrote that art and politics, the latter understood as a practice in service of public life, find their common denominator precisely in dissent: in the individual’s ability to associate with or dissociate from a certain interpretation of reality. The dissent expressed by these movements, which can be seen as a democratic act, opens up a space of contact within the institutional framework where dialogue can be manifested through conflict. The museum institution can relinquish its appearance as an impartial container by involving more local and international collectives and creating moments of the debate that allow for dissent within the museum. By committing to clarify its position even through public statements and actions of solidarity, the museum can become more transparent about its values and beliefs. Conflict is, in conclusion, a more productive form of communication, and, a museum under attack is already, if only in power, a more inclusive museum.

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61. JANES 2015, p. 3.

62. JANES 2015, p. 3.

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THE NEW INSTITUTIONAL CRITIQUE AND THE CONTESTATION  
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