

# What's the Matter with the Institutions of Art?

## Preliminary Remarks on the Current State of Affairs

In the hypotheses advanced in conjunction with the TAKEOVER theme, Ars Electronica 2001 poses the question of how art institutions and businesses plan to survive in the future. What is going on with institutions whose front doors are jammed by ever-broader segments of the population flocking inside while new art and fresh artistic talent might just be slipping out the back? With many artistic facilities having recently been set out by legal reforms to sink or swim in the waters of the private sector, what chances do they have now that they must learn to function according to the rules of the culture industry and to stage their offerings as experiences in order to make it in the “economy of attention”? What state do such institutions find themselves in if they must simultaneously struggle to safeguard art's safe haven of free expression and thus society's venues for the encounter with difficult, challenging material?

### **Dematerialization of Art and the Creation of Value**

Diagnoses of a “dematerialization” of art and identification of tendencies toward the processual in art are by no means new, but many art institutions continue to have difficulties reacting appropriately to these and other important changes in the concept of the work of art. This state of affairs has been subjected to repeated critique—recently by Tim Druckrey, for instance, who describes the problems that result when media art is to be presented in institutions that are unfamiliar with its history and complex manifestations. Such phenomena are part of an extensive process of adaptation as a reaction to a wide-ranging dematerialization of the creation of value in general that Georg Franck identified in his work on an “economy of attention.”

The copyright wars of recent years provide an initial impression of the power held by the driving forces that are organizing themselves around the dematerialization of the creation of economic value. These processes have made themselves evident with the waning of the traditional concept of the work of art connected with a physical object on one hand and the emergence of digital technologies on the other, and their effects will not be limited to music and film.

### **Internet Culture and Loss of the Mediation Monopoly**

In the fields of both artistic presentation and production, conventional art institutions have lost their monopoly on providing access to art and mediating the encounter with it. The easy availability of reproductions and of digital/digitized works in the Internet have initiated a process of erosion that is being intensified by forms of art that have long since been able to dispense with a traditional exhibition venue as a presentation context.

As elaborated on in the “Observations about the TAKEOVER” and TAKEOVER interviews, producers of art who have been socialized with the Internet and digital tools do not cultivate the status of the artist and the rituals of access to the institutions of art any more since they can no longer reasonably expect this to be an advantage for them and have long since organized their artistic activities according to other models. As a result, the more agile art institutions have launched efforts in the meantime to integrate the creative potential of the TAKEOVER into their presentations.

### Culture Industry and the Economy of Attention

Institutions of art find that they have become part of a culture industry that is distributing its products across global media landscapes and is learning to act in accordance with the laws prevailing there. According to the model that Kevin Kelly has described as “self-reinforcing success,” they are pursuing general concentration tendencies within a scenario of the global mobility of capital and resources.

The art institutions that have thus been so highly professionalized are active in markets in which it is the resource attention that constitutes the commodity in short supply and not information, which is available in such abundance. For art, whose conditions of reception have always been treated as something special, it is also especially significant if what Stewart Brand maintains is actually true: “Civilization is revving itself into a pathologically short attention span.” The media operate within this attention span, as do forms of art that have emerged through the transitions of motion graphics, film and Web design. The essence of culture industries is that they do not “industrially produce culture” in the literal sense of their misleading label, but rather utilize as their “raw material” the culture that is constantly taking shape anew and reforming in the intertwined relationships of cultural subjects, and then exploit this like the industrial societies—that have long since mutated into information societies—do with their fossil fuel reserves. Perhaps what is emerging here is a field for the study of “cultural ecology,” which might take up the questions of the complex feedback effects and systemic interconnections of exploitation by the content industries.

### Shopping and Lines of Retreat

It is part of an “ongoing economification of the social process” when art institutions today portray themselves as part of the culture industry and both of them as suppliers of the international content industries.

Expertise in matters of media and economification of the social process meet in the phenomenon of shopping. Rem Koolhaas—who advises Prada and Guggenheim alike—has characterized shopping as “a primary mode of urban life.” This phenomenon, which has long been a subject of reflection in the venues of art as well, not only impacts the concept of art institutions; it also refers to their changed role: “In the age of globalization, the work of the museums is becoming more important than ever for the economy because cultural capacities of discernment are all that is left that makes possible preferences in what line of goods is offered for sale,” maintains Bazon Brock, who goes on to state that “[in the meantime, all wares have come to display the character of consumer products, [and therefore] all cultural productions are also [becoming] wares.”

This changed significance of art institutions has accompanied a change in art’s role in society, which is not least of all connected to the crisis of the politicization of art. The more all-encompassing the economification and its effects become, the more essential becomes the significance attributed to the sanctuaries that art is able to establish. As designer Bruce Mau wrote: “It is absolutely indispensable for a culture to stake out an area for difficult material, to create a place that does not comply with the dictates of the market.” The idea of lines of retreat is to be found in the work of Gilles Deleuze: “According to Deleuze and Guattari, society does not define itself by means of contradictions, but rather through its active lines of retreat. History thus does not proceed by means of the negation of negation, but rather through the resolution of problems and the affirmation of differences. Contradiction is not the weapon of the proletariat; to a much greater extent, it is how the bourgeoisie defends and maintains itself. (Deleuze, *Differenz und Wiederholung*)”



Oberes Belvedere

### The Museum as Cultural Model and the Inclination to Experience

Victoria Newhouse has shown that, since the appearance on the art scene of installations, video and performance, the museum has come to resemble the theater, and she therefore refers to the “museum as entertainment.” According to Newhouse, this brings a long-term process full circle, whereby contemporary forms of the presentation of art are again displaying traits of the collections of the Renaissance and the early days of the museum as a cultural model. Art institutions are drawing closer to event culture; the spectacle is being integrated into museum contexts, the museography of exhibitions follows according to the criteria of experience orientation, and the design of the venues of art follows considerations of architectural and urban *mise en scène*, and—guided not just by the imperative to turn out tourist attractions—seek to turn these places into landmarks and, subsequently, “destinations.” These functions are also indicative of a networked understanding of the role of art institutions in an urban context and of an extended urbanist network linking together the venues of art. What Christian Mikunda describes in his theory of the concept of the “third place” refers to strategies of construction whereby—following the disappearance of the original work of art—the significance of the original location is also receding in importance, and the staged reconstruction is often more easily readable than what are by this point merely rudimentary originals.

These strategies of construction combine with other factors to now make these venues of art structurally comparable to shopping malls and urban entertainment centers. Whereas many art institutions are having to perform tricky balancing acts between the feared plunge into “the character of a department store” and the “elevatedness” that has traditionally characterized the presentation of works of art, they are nevertheless increasingly turning to certain methods from the world of shopping and entertainment, and not the least important reason for this is that in times of diminishing public subsidies, these institutions would no longer be economically viable without the contributions that shops, restaurants, facility rental and sponsorship make to the bottom line. Wolfgang Waldner, the director of the recently opened MuseumsQuartier in Vienna, stresses the importance of a line of demarcation clearly setting off the world of shopping centers and entertainment: “We cannot confuse this with entertainment because that is something else altogether. This is certainly not the place for shallow entertainment, though we will indeed advocate and pursue an expanded concept of culture here. (...) The operator of Shopping City does not care who his tenant is as long as the rent is paid up. Here, our task is not to squeeze out all the revenue we can, but rather to always remain focused on the character of this place of culture. Entertainment in the sense of a broad spectrum of offerings and a facility and grounds that make people feel comfortable, however, will most assuredly be our aim.”



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Also of relevance in this respect is the formula attributed to Thomas Krens, the director of the Guggenheim Museums, which cites four criteria that determine the success of a museum: permanent collection, temporary exhibits, architecture, and shops/restaurants. The great importance placed on spectacular architecture—with Frank O. Gehry's design for the Guggenheim in Bilbao as a most prominent example—has already given rise to discussions about the potentially negative consequences of a competition breaking out between architecture and art. Bazon Brock regards certain measures taken by museums to enhance the attractiveness of their offerings as a threat to their own cause: “This came about as a result of the counterproductive emphasis placed on experience and the event-qualities of the museums’ offerings. This orientation on happenings and Big Shows is counterproductive because those putting them on have thus seen themselves forced to continually devalue their own work by spectacularly outdoing its purported attractiveness.”

### **Media Literacy and “Culture for All”**

While art institutions might be letting artists get away from them, some of them are being absolutely flooded with visitors, in some cases far more—as Bazon Brock has pointed out—than sports facilities.

Institutions of the art world that have until now often gone about their business in elitist fashion and oriented their offerings on relatively small target audiences are becoming more open and redefining their mission to include facilitating the access to art for broad segments of the population. In this connection, Wolfgang Waldner demands “that the attempt be made to offer culture more diversely, to also make it understandable for other social strata, and accessible by a wider audience. That means: to also make that which is unpleasant or unconventional comprehensible to laypeople, though without going about this in populist fashion.” Thus, what are now being offered are primarily contexts loaded with art, and the art itself is being presented according to other criteria than has usually been the case up to now. Here, art institutions often find themselves in a dilemma that Tate Director Nicholas Serota has characterized as one of “experience or interpretation.”

Christian Mikunda has cited the “increasing ‘media literacy’ not only on the part of the consumers but also of the creators of works of art and culture,” which has created “a common aesthetic pool.” Consumers with greater media expertise are more demanding and more knowledgeable visitors to art institutions, in which they again encounter those “raw materials” from which omnipresent advertising and the media draw their content. The facilities and institutions of art that are now open to mass culture come across as a belated fulfillment of old leftist cultural policy demands that have finally come to fruition—what delicious irony—under conditions of ruthless, globalized capitalism.