



John Knight, "de champagne", 1994

Isabelle Graw: When reading about your work, I noticed that it is often classified under the label "institutional critique". This concept is based on the assumption that art is supposedly capable to "critique" either the literal institutional site or cultural confinement in general and can thereby attain an epistemological function. I was wondering, what both the notions of "critique" and of "institution" mean in relation to your work. Is it the institution in the narrow sense of an art institution addressed as topographical entity? Or is it rather an enlarged notion of the institution as an abstract continuity of corporate structures that cannot be pinned down to the literal site only?

John Knight: Those texts that you refer to are coming from the art institutional site of exchange, where the term institutional critique derives as well. My interest, however, is to participate in the larger cultural critical discourse and not some rarefied site of my own construction. That does not mean that my practice resides outside of the art world, but that the subjects I find interesting may.

Graw: What I like about your work is exactly that it doesn't seem to be fixated on the art apparatus. The "journal series", first initiated in 1977, is a work that anticipates how the laws of so-called "Celebrity Culture" actually entered the art world in order to take over and reign today. When you literally forced subscriptions of lifestyle magazines onto members of the art world, changed cultural hierarchies were addressed as much as the impossibility of an idealized belief in art became obvious. Your work has diagnostic and prophetic potential in pointing to the dramatic shifts whose consequences we are dealing with today.

Benjamin H.D. Buchloh: Which may have been one of the reasons why the work was sometimes hard to accept.

Knight: Well, I have never really understood where such idealized belief systems come from. Certainly, the majority of my work is derived from sources other than aesthetic models within art history and seem to manifest themselves in many different ways, which may be why the work is less acceptable. After all, when you grow up inside the spectacle apparatus of Los Angeles, celebrity culture becomes ones naturalized base of understanding.

Graw: How would you characterize the difference between your project and Michael Asher's and Daniel Buren's?

Knight: Well, although we agree about many things, I think there is something fundamentally different between my practice and theirs. Theirs' seems to be based on a keenly developed interest in a radical expansion of the problems of sculpture and painting respectively - in quite extraordinary ways. I have never shared, to the same degree of interest or depth of understanding, a project that is initiated from within an art historical perspective. For that reason, I've always felt somewhat outside of the socio-political shell of that institution - let's say it's a bit of a foreign body to me.

Graw: But aren't you, as soon as you have had a series of exhibitions as you did, deeply entangled in the microcosmos of the art world? Even if you don't want to invest in it?

Knight: I don't say that I'm not practicing in that world. I've never had an investment in the internal structural characteristics of any its historical problems. I'm absolutely working in the art world, but I think there is a difference between that and working on the custodial

conditions of art history.

Buchloh: The bicycle bell work you did in The Hague in 1994, what kind of work is that? How do you see that now? It positions itself in what kind of discursive intersections?

Knight: Well, I would say that it is located, or more accurately, operates between the two registers of the micro-institution of art, where the opportunity begins and the larger discursive site of geopolitics.

Buchloh: One could start by describing it as a project that situates itself explicitly in the specificity of a nation/state cultural issue, and another way is, that it situates itself in the specificity of ecological questions particularly relevant in that nation/state condition. You wouldn't have done that piece in Germany, for example...

Knight: Absolutely not. In those terms, it clearly had to be in the Netherlands. What else I can say is, that it's a very good example of dropping into the art world by invitation in order to produce a work with a subject that refers to a sociopolitical located outside the micro-political boundaries of the art world.

Graw: So you step in, in order to point in another direction.

Knight: I step in, in order to receive the opportunities to function. For whatever socio-psychological reasons, this subculture seems to be the most compatible for the formulation of a base of operation.

Buchloh: If only it still were a subculture...

Knight: What would you call it?

Graw: A Visual Industry...

Buchloh: Monolithic...

Knight: Actually I think it operates like a small town meeting.

Buchloh: Right.

Graw: It has both characteristics: It is an overlookable market place with archaic transactions and has corporate dimensions.

Knight: I agree. There is something very interesting about the fact that it remains so very archaic and at the same time totally subsumed by the meta-business of the day with little real understanding, or care, by those at the epicentre, for a notion of political resistance.

Buchloh: The bicycle bell. What I really liked about that work is it redefines in a single gesture every model of site specificity that we had possibly thought about until that moment and it's completely reversing every aspect of site specificity. And nevertheless as it does so it gives a completely new model of the absolute necessity for specific interventions. It's not like going into some fake globalism or some mythical opening-up, but it really redefines the levels of intervention in the different types of site specific approaches and these are geopolitical, ecological and nation/state specific.

Knight: I would refer to it as a form of discursive specificity, but certainly not the situational model of site specificity that has been proposed by Miwon Kwon and others, that tend to legitimate a generation of 90s fashion production the likes of Pardo, etc. which are essentially designer knick-knacks disguised as "installation art."

Graw: So in what way is the way you legitimize your practice through a site different from that type of practice you just criticized, like Pardo's.

Knight: Because I don't think my project is constructed for or received in the same way. It's not reified under the conditions of the already fixated institutional frame like those projects are. I try not to reproduce the actual model of production that I'm attempting to interrogate as I think others do with impunity.

Buchloh: You were the first artist that I've known who for many, many years without even understanding what you meant at the time, to say, all artistic decisions are design decisions. Your interest in design as a language, as one language amongst many systems within an ideological apparatus, has become very clear by now. Your understanding of design history and of design traditions in their transformation from the 1920's to the 1950's is a very integral part of that. Why would you then not welcome an artist like Pardo who

supposedly does exactly that in the most programmatic way. He's the guy who brought this out to the foreground and made a mega-project out of it.

Knight: Well, I welcome the illustration of the problem I think it represents, but don't cuddle-up to projects so politically bankrupted. It is exactly the black hole of consumption that it wants to be and questions precisely nothing.

Graw: His work is not about posing or causing problems.

Knight: There are no problems, but I would take this back to the Bauhaus, and the inherent problems in designing for a better world, which carries itself over to Cranbrook and spreads about the globe as it enters into the marketplace, vis-à-vis Design for Better Living, Design Research, Design Within Reach, and of course, the granddaddy of them all, IKEA. Product design, interior design and installation design are all deeply implicated in capitalist ideology. It's the primary lexicon for substantiating neo-liberalism. It's the off-the-shelf language of hegemony.

Buchloh: But it has a long complicated history with gradations, at the same time for example you are deeply interested, as far as I know, in Eames. What's your interest in Eames? I never really understood if it was a critical interest or an interest in the Eames effect. I think it was both probably, because the Eames are kind of a design history turning point where it departs from the emancipatory promises of Bauhaus practices and International Style to the initiation of the massively operated consumer culture via design. We now see the consequences of it in ways that we had never anticipated.

Knight: The day after they made the splints and bentwood research was the day they took a political dive. Although they did appear to have a partial reprieve at the moment their house was completed, but in the end it all added up to a career of corporate cronyism - IBM utopianism - producing under the guise of multiculturalism, slide installations and film projects, "It's a small world" etc. These projects represent the epitome of corporate propaganda.

Buchloh: When they go to the Soviet Union, most evidently so.

Graw: I'm interested in coming to terms with different types of site reflexivity or context specificity. There are cases - as in Liam Gillick's work - where the supposedly given context or site simply functions as a legitimization for a work that is ultimately formalist and doesn't address or pose problems. Is a context something that is given for you? Or do you construct it yourself to a certain degree?

Knight: I think of context as a multi-dimensional condition. The initial context is provided by invitation, which acts as an index, and operates as the basis for any number of other considerations that are drawn from a larger discursive site.

Graw: But the choice of the bicycle bells doesn't seem completely evident to me. There is a moment of playfulness, of an arbitrary decision or even of something that you didn't deliberately choose but that came to you.

Knight: I would say that it seems to come from a process of trial and error, and is located sometime between consideration and its manifest realization at which time it becomes intentional. Many artists attribute it to a mysterious act that takes place in the studio process...this idea truly fascinates me.

Buchloh: The credit card-project from "World Debt" is also a good example because it indicates strategies of defining your work that clearly interrelate different geopolitical systems or expanded notions of geopolitical distribution, and construct at an early moment a sense of the inescapability of culture as being suspended within globalized forms of conflict and interest and exchanges way before the whole talk of globalization became an issue in cultural practices. First of all I'm surprised that no one has really recognized your work for having gone to that issue early on and taken such a position and secondly I would like to know how your position, your own investigation with regard to what has now become a tendency or a trend or compulsive dimension of all curatorial operations to position themselves in international biennials or to position themselves as globalist, wasn't

recognized within that tendency as having anticipated or uncovered the necessity to see those intersections when it comes to cultural production.

Knight: The institution that you are referring to, is deeply implicated in the dominate ideology of Western hegemony, and therefore blinded by its own power structure. So, it should not come as a surprise to see global culture being presented as a commodity. On the other hand, it was immediately recognized by the Cuban participants in the bell project, for example. I was stunned by the clarity of their understanding and support for my engagement in geopolitical exchange.

Buchloh: And a follow-up question: Why did Okwui Enwezor not include you in the last Documenta? Why did he not understand what you were doing?

Knight: I don't know but I would suspect that its because these are not exhibitions designated for a real political discourse, after all there constructed from within the art institution and are by nature nothing more than political pastiche. I did go to the effort to make an unsolicited proposal to the Documenta committee, to which I received no response. Being in yet another Documenta inspired me very little, but the program of this particular exhibition was of great interest to me, as you know there was this structure of five "platforms" scattered about the globe, in places of real social crisis, with the fifth operating as the actual exhibition in Kassel. Global crisis exacerbated by the World Bank and IMF policies, so, I thought the ideal conditions of reception for my Worlddebt project would be to be streaming back to the art world from the four initial sites, via the world wide web without any representation in Kassel itself. As we knew at the time, those invited to participate in the four other platforms were made up of the Prada set with absolutely no local representation at all. All in all, it seemed to be an ideal opportunity to drag a larger discursive condition into an intersection with the institution of art.

Graw: While you were describing the work I was thinking of a particular explanation for it not being taken into consideration. Curators tend to have a list of names, the usual suspects in their minds. A list that is being reproduced, and is also very fixed. The reason that your work doesn't figure on it could be that it doesn't fit into a general desire for thematically reductivist, so-called political works, orks that are supposedly "dealing with" a certain subject matter.

Knight: I would agree with you and say that in addition to not participating in the institutional food chain - which equates to dropping off the institutional radar, my project not only disagrees with the recent curator as meta-artist trend, it challenges the very nature of such an action by insistently indicting the organizing body, each and every time, within the critical status of the work.

Buchloh: Globalism in the art world is kind of a missionary venture. It disguises the search for new market and the search for new resources as this project of disseminating liberal, advanced forms of cultural representation. But in fact it doesn't analyze the real ideology of global interests within the cultural sphere at all as being primarily centered within the very power and economic centers of our own empire and that's what your work does and therefore it disqualifies itself completely from being absorbed in the globalist ideology of contemporary cultural institutions. That would be my answer to my own question.

Knight: I would agree with you and the exhibition histories are there to prove it, from the Centre Pompidou exhibition a number of years ago, "Magiciens de la terre," to the Documenta 11, "The Museum as Muse," and historically "Primitivism in 20th Century Art" at MoMA.

Graw: I was just thinking back to what we said before, about the odd coexistence between an archaic structure of transactions on the one hand and corporate structure defining what used to be called the art world. I think that this condition is materialized in your work for American Fine Arts. Your work anticipates the situation we are facing today where there is a seamless continuity between the art gallery, the boutique and the lobbies of corporations. If you go to Gagolian or Matthew Marks, they are decorated with these

same types of bouquets.

Knight: And restaurants.

Graw: And restaurants, as you pointed out in your exhibition. So this continuity which has become even more pronounced since then is really addressed in that work. On the other hand, there is the archaic networking in the restaurant, the importance and value of personals that are also metaphorically addressed in that show. For me it's a work that already in 1998 anticipated a condition that we only start to fully understand now.

Knight: I must say I've always been a bit disappointed that it was not realized when I first proposed it to an uptown gallerist in 1988, which at the time elicited the infamous moment of silence.

Graw: Too early, she didn't get it.

Knight: In any event, Colin de Land had known about the proposal from that time and always had it in his mind to do it someday. I must say that the way in which the work was ultimately realized was an extraordinary experience to say the least. There we were, on the street like two missionaries going from restaurant to restaurant proselytizing in seersucker and sunglasses. What a wonderful way to produce. There is a fabulous picture of the two of us posed in front of a potential client.

Graw: Were you interested in the increasing structural analogies between what used to be called the art world, the fashion industry and corporate logics - spheres that are now very deeply overlapping and was this something you saw coming?

Knight: Well, these are some of the larger cultural considerations that I've been referring to when I speak about work within the greater discursive site of influence. This is how, I think, something like the Journals could be considered a viable site of production - victimizing myself, so to speak, in order to understand the consumer condition.

Graw: Didn't you also victimize others by forcing a subscription onto them?

Knight: Actually, I gave them a work of art that by its critical nature reconfigured the receiver's position in relationship to the conventions of the consumption and exchange process, which makes them a partner in the indictment of the works intention.

Buchloh: I have one question that has to been with me for a long time, as you know. Which is your principle of only producing a work when receiving a commission?

Knight: The origins of that are rather mysterious to me why I would insist to the point of self -detriment.

Buchloh: It's also a strange concept of creativity. It's an amalgam, that's what's interesting about it. No artist in our history would have let be defined their creativity in terms of an external request. It's the counter-creativity model, it totally defines the act of intervention as being externally determined as a dialogic interaction, but not as a monologic appropriation.

Knight: In modernity yes, but once the site of Immaculate Conception is put to question...

Buchloh: When is that?

Knight: At the moment the studio is no longer the primary site of production. But, I don't speak about it in the same way as I would refer to the Buren effect, which, as I understand it, was to see the need to question the studio function in order to open up the possibilities for a radical expansion of an art historical problem. Mine was based, at least initially, on a keen interest in models of production - architecture, etc. that are primarily grounded, once again, in larger socio-political discourses. Of course, in order to maintain ones sanity, there exists a closet practice, musing endlessly with propositions with the hopes that somebody finds out.

Graw: Everybody has something in the drawer.

Buchloh: Is that what you do?

Knight: Yes. But, I must say again that I never understood that idea of something happening again and again in the same specific place. It just makes no sense to me.

Buchloh: What are you referring to as something happening again and again in the same place.

Knight: Studio production. The continuous generation of work out of the same monolithic site.

Graw: How about the commodity status of your work? On the one hand I feel that your work is consistently emphasizing a non-idealist understanding of art as commodity - for instance in the flower bouquet project - on the other hand it seems to emphasize that art is a commodity, but a commodity of a special kind especially as your works don't circulate as much as others do as pure exchange value on the market. So the commodity status is addressed - your work has no illusions about it - but then again you produce works that don't circulate on the market. It's a paradox.

Knight: Is it a paradox? I would call it a moment of resistance in the commodity exchange, when the receiver is given the task to figure out how, if at all, how to commodify a product, which might define the terms of its own unique commodity status. Not to say that this is something that has been clearly thought through, but it is a position that I desire for my work... Something that has every means available to it and every reason to be consumed yet remains aloof suggests that the possibility for an interrogation exists. As Adorno would say, the moment of negation.

Graw: And how exactly does it happen in a work like the JK relief?

Buchloh: Or the mirrors?

Knight: I don't know if it does happen.

Buchloh: It doesn't because they're objects.

Knight: But they're all objects.

Buchloh: I would say that the mirrors and the JK logotypes are traditional objects you can put them in an auction you can sell them as a painting or a relief or a sculpture.

Knight: You could put the bells or the credit cards for the "Worldebt" project in auction as well.

Graw: They're less suitable to this market sensibility because they correspond less to the longing for a signature style.

Knight: I've had numerous mirrors returned.

Buchloh: Numerous mirrors returned because of what?

Knight: Maybe they are over designed.

Buchloh: Oh really, people didn't like them anymore? What can they trade them for?

Knight: Presumably other art.

Graw: In what way is this related to your notion of career? Faced with a situation where young artists have very positivistic and unbroken models of career your model seems to be the non-career as career.

Buchloh: This relates very well to the previous question: how can one define one's practice as externally determined by commission only so to speak for lack of more...

Knight: This notion of career, or should we say careerism, is certainly the bankrupted idea that allows for a seamless trajectory through a set of predetermined goals that provides the producer with the skills necessary to navigate the neo-liberal global marketplace.

Buchloh: And so your model and I think in this case it's comparable to Michael Asher's approach as well, is a theoretical model that defines the artist as non-producer. But it's not just a case of refusal or negation only, it's much more complicated than this and you were just about to elaborate on it in a very interesting way, that it's not a withholding position, it's not a position of pure negation, it's a position that intricately engages with the condition of cultural production and with the concept of the response that you provide to those conditions, namely corporate cultural demands for pure utility. In a sense you make a contract every single time you make a work anticipating that the work will be used anyway. The work has no freedom, the work has no autonomy, the work is inscribed from the very beginning in a transaction of exchange, deployment, representational functions. In those terms it is possible to see why you engage in a contract only rather than a model of creativity and independence and autonomy.

Knight: I think it represents an inversion of what takes place in the marketplace conundrum, wherein a contract is presumed onto the receiver through strategies of seduction. In turn, the consumer assumes they're in control as a commissioner of that pair of shoes or sculptural knick-knack when in fact, it is precisely the contrary. Understanding that is to understand the need for a position of resistance, which I think resides in the inversion of the order of need, that can allow an artist the opportunity to the touch upon subjects of consumption and exchange, and the design strategies that sustain their presumed purpose within the culture industry without reverting to the role of a cultural custodian.