

A Critique of the Institutionalization Mechanism in Art: the emergence of the quotidian and the spontaneous

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Study No. 5091888

Abstract:

Art has always been seen as an upper-class subject due to its constructed reality. The notion of the museum evolved around this phenomenon of the “spectacle” as Debord puts in words, which yields museums to become places of image-saturated consumer culture rather than an embodiment of creative production and social empowerment.

Once one goes into a museum, assumes that all items are valuable without skeptically thinking how much does the artwork responds to aesthetic values or make the spectator interact. The institutionalization and its mechanism alienate the society from art and the museum. This alienation of the art also brings the problem of depreciation of the intrinsic values in a world of consumerism and conservative art authorities. The mechanism of the institutionalization also leads to counter-acts such as Pop-Art and the Situationist International in the 20th century to subvert the idea of consumerism and commodity with different inputs. The accumulatively built notion of “institutionalization” deprives the artist and the observers of an autonomous and independent aesthetic experience, as a result of the consumption-oriented mechanism dominating the monetary value and the perception of art where art becomes an ornament of the museum.

The transformation of art increases the distance between the observer and the art, resulting in the lack of communication and participation. Not only the art but the museum also ends up being an object to consume, rather than playing a role as a catalyst in both urban and social contexts. The change of the value of art isolates the work itself from the expression while pushing the observer to simply look

rather than to see, as Berger explains. This superficial act of appreciating art also corrupts the aura of the museum where it should be a space for production, “muse” and interaction rather than consumption. In order to regain the aura of the museum and to blend it with the quotidian where everybody can encounter with art, a new mechanism is needed.

In this paper, the focus is on the institutionalization, the conventional concept of art, the museum and the relationship with art and the public. What kind of resistance or opposition may re-define the value of the art and the museum is elaborately investigated with the guidance of Situationists and the pop-art where the aim is to establish a bottom-up system. The aim of the theoretical framework is to generate new museology as a resistance that denies the cliched system of institutionalization to re-determine the value of art with both collaborative and individual apprehension and skeptical thinking. The research will be conducted by using a qualitative method as theoretical research on the organization of art and historical research on the evolution of the movements regarding institutionalization. In case study research examples of art markets, acts of resistance and opposition in art and museums, biennials, and their influence on the evaluation of art, including Situationists and avant-garde works beginning from the mid-20th century are evaluated.

Keywords:

institutionalization, spontaneity, art museum, value of art, public

Word Count: 5140

Introduction

Art today can be seen as a big pile of snowball which accumulates along the way, with its complex interrelations and dynamics. With the dynamics of society, institutionalization is ubiquitous, unexceptional and inseparable from the art and the artist. When one talks about art, he often talks about the biennials, art fairs, auctions, ignoring intrinsic value of art. Institutionalization intervened in every field of art beginning from the production of art to the display of it. Among its multidisciplinary roots and its diverse use, “institutionalization” can be described as “a custom or tradition that has existed for a long time and is accepted as an important part of a particular society”¹ or as “a large and important organization”². The definitions also prove that institutions are dynamics which influence human action and society to establish certain criterion and preferences on the determined subject.

When art is examined by abstracting all the parameters, it becomes a form of expression which includes including the act of production, an artist and a result. However with the interaction and the society all the parameters turn art into an object that is assessed by various authorities for various qualities. The journey of the artwork, beginning from the production of the artist to the arrival of the artwork to its “buyer” becomes a chain reaction where the aura and the intrinsic value of the artwork diminish to a monetary value. Going back to the institution’s definition the “particular society” becomes the key subject while evaluating how the value of art shifts according to the values of the society.

The evolution of the institutionalization can be evaluated concerning three main aspects, art, space and society. These aspects show that even though institutionalization gives the impression of rationalization, formality and functionality, the notion of uncertainty stemming from human nature is enough to create a subversive effect on the conservative institutionalization. In today’s society where the new religion is the economics and the hierarchy, the dynamics are determined according to the level of fulfilment in terms of possessions and desires. Society becomes the dependent variable in this experiment; as society changes its dynamics, the art and the space of display transforms into something different according to the demand.

When one goes into a museum immediately assumes that all the art pieces are valuable due to unconditionally relying on the assessment process of the art piece, depending the piece's value on its monetary value, popularity, and media's attention. As the distance between the artist and the observer increases, the intrinsic value of art which gives shape to individual fulfillments, muse and creativity begins to disappear. (figure 1&2)

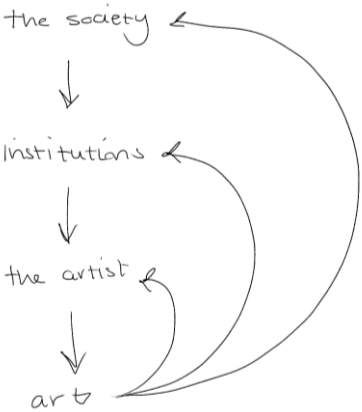


figure 1. the cycle of change and its effects

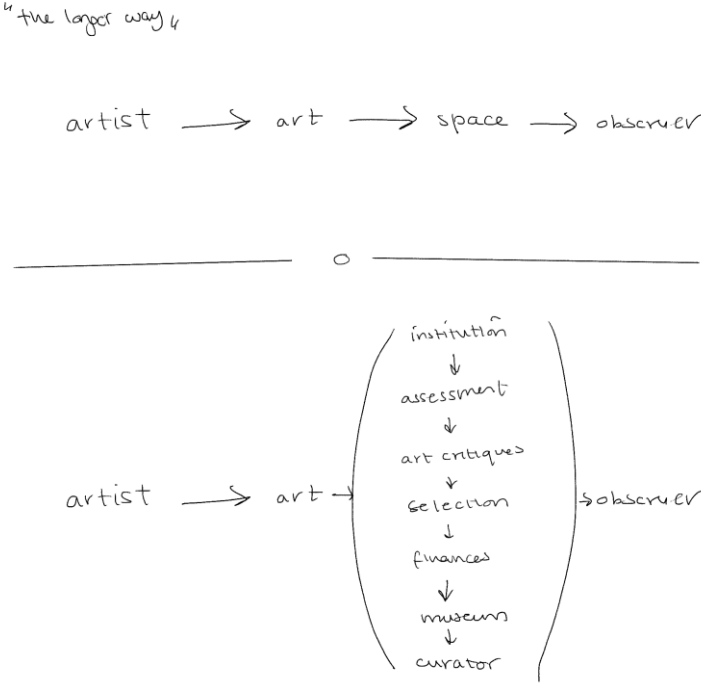


figure 2. the way towards to the observer

The act of seeing has transformed into the act of looking, where awareness and acknowledgement make the difference. As Guy Debord puts in words in 1967,

*“In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation.”*³

the societies, as the most significant wheel of the mechanism, diminished the perception of production and experiences to the superficial representations. This argument also applies in the field of art, where production loses its aura and product becomes an object to consume rather than a trigger to think and to act. Because of having a great distance between the artist, the art and the observer, the observer becomes alienated from the artwork, despite having the desire to consume the piece. This mechanism ends up having the institutions and authorities on the focus rather than the museums, the artists, the observer and the artwork. As a consequence, art becomes an ornament where museum becomes just a market rather than being a Μουσείον (mouseion), “the shrine of the Muses”⁴. Throughout the time, it seems that the institutionalization inhibits the notion of the expression of the social transformation. In art, it means that the end product is alienated from its maker and its observer, and is fully devoted to the system of assessment with an economic drive. The conservative approach of the institutions not only causes subversive acts today, but it also provoked past subversive acts, leading the Situationists and Pop-art to emerge. Turning back to the times of modernism, these subversive acts show which aspects of institutionalization were criticized and what kind of mechanisms were offered to cope with the alienation. Now, with the light of past acts, the importance and the quality of the new wheels for the new mechanism to enhance the intrinsic value of the art and the museum can be understood clearly by acknowledging the problems of the society dynamics and its demands.

Form follows consumption: The Mechanism of Institutionalization

The term “art management” appears with the emergence of neo-liberal politics in corporations in the 1970s. The change in the mechanism can be originated from the concept of Taylorism, which alienates the process of production from the original maker by integrating the machine work into the process⁵. The trajectory of Taylorism in art resulted a great distance between the art, the artist and the observer. Earlier, the observer and the maker could empathize and the observer could appreciate the apparent process on the product. Whereas now, with the mass-production and growing notion of commodity shifts the focus from process to a product-oriented perception, resulting inferior products and observers who yield to consume without thinking. The shift from crafts to machine dominated production also yielded the floor to the dynamics of management from the dynamics of production. According to Deleuze, each society corresponds to a type of machine. Since society centers consumption, it is no longer an energy machine but evolved into a cybernetic machine, a computer.⁶ Therefore the society evolves into a corporation from a factory, which focuses on consumption, not production. The transformation of the society of corporation highlights the words bureaucracy, economy and rationality, which reduced the appreciation and experience to the “urgent need to buy”. The mechanism leads the art foundations to become business models. Some of the examples of this business approach are the emergence of new forms of mediums besides museums and galleries, such as art fairs, art biennials and auctions. Biennials originate from the world expos where colonialist culture was legitimized in the 19th century. Today it can be seen as contemporary translations of these modern universal “spectacles”. Biennials set a base for the “spectacle” in which corporations display their business dynamics rather than their art. According to Artun, in biennials “every interaction is a transaction”⁷, reducing the intrinsic effect of art and emphasizing “the look” for the popular, the contemporary, the expensive. According to MoMA’s research on gaze, a patron of the arts looks at an art piece approximately for 7 seconds.⁸ The statistics also show that the biennials and museums have turned into the tools for marketing rather than displaying. At this point, the approach of “anything goes” becomes dominant, vanishing the ontological and aesthetic aspects of the art. According to the art critic Jerry Saltz, art fairs and biennials are just “spectacles” where collaboration, patience,

sincerity and “not even seeing” is out of question.⁹ This approach where the biggest wheels of the mechanism are the institutions, leads the art to lose its aura and authenticity. The cacophony of the institutions also adds other wheels such as the art collectors and the curators to the mechanism of consumption and commodity. It is apparent that over the years, the number of curators and collectors had exceeded the number of the artworks. The collectors, unlike the earlier times, Sir John Soane is a good example in this aspect, are collecting art pieces as bank checks for their monetary value, instead of a collection for common pleasure and enthusiasm. The curators become the “aristocratic managers” of the art and culture industry who are responsible for being the embodiment of the institutions. The addition of the wheel of curators to the mechanism requires the filtration process to be more selective and strict. Therefore the curators, collectors, art consultants, managers besides the banks and corporations dominate the artist and the artwork and display. The drive of the institution becomes corporate communication rather than producing art. In this vicious chain, there is no room for society and their empathy and appreciation for the artworks. Art BASEL, Art Cologne and the Istanbul Biennial are some of the examples of the art fairs and biennials organizing the marketing of the art where the artist strives for recognition and appreciation from the institutions and the institutions strive for the immediate consumption. The posters of the Istanbul Biennial (figure 3) reflects the dominance



figure 3. 13th and 14th Istanbul Biennial Posters with the dominance of the company logos

of the institutions (including banks) and the notion of commodity in art since each corporation and its logo take place on the poster besides the theme of the biennial in the absence of the artists. Therefore, posters become the primary trajectories which art is performed bespoke and under the supervision of the patrons of art and curators proving the importance of marketing and the monetary value of art.

To sum up, due to their strong bond with institutionalization and consumption, biennials, art fairs and auctions contrast the museums, by transforming the perception of art as fast and inferior. This mechanism exists and is stiffening for a long time, long enough for Guy Debord to resist this idea of the spectacle and commodity in art in 1967 with his book *the Society of the Spectacle*. The dynamics of the society hasn't changed much in terms of institutionalization yet, the demand of a new mechanism, or additions/subtractions from the mechanism is apparent. According to Swyngedouw, "For Debord, capitalism had reached its zenith by the late 1950s and had completed its total colonization of everyday life ... For Debord, the pivot of a capitalist economy and culture is commodity." To break this chain of colonization of everyday life by the market value and the notion of the commodity, new resistances had emerged in history such as the pop-art and situationists, which have their way of critiquing the status of art and its increasing monetary value. The resistances highlight the defects of the system which distances art from the society and makes it unapproachable and less understandable in terms of its intrinsic value. By looking back to these resistances and their demands in contrast to the mechanism of institutionalization, the needs of the new dynamics of the society which grows diverse each day can be understood in terms of art, its display and the artist.

Resistance A: Emergence of Pop-art and Kitsch

In 1957, Richard Hamilton wrote a letter about the features of pop-art: “*Pop Art is: Popular (designed for a mass audience), Transient (short-term solution), Expendable (easily forgotten), Low cost, Mass produced, Young (aimed at youth), Witty, Sexy, Gimmicky, Glamorous, Big business*”.¹⁰ Pop-art is a movement that opposes the “high-art” and consumerism and blurs the boundaries between “high-art” and low culture by the integration of common and quotidian objects such as comic strips, food cans, newspapers in artworks. The artists such as Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, Richard Hamilton supported the idea that art should be accessible by everyone and there shouldn’t be any hierarchy to disrupt this trade between the observer and the artist. According to Hamilton’s definition of Pop-art, the art becomes low cost, and designed for the mass audience offering a short term solution. Even though the movement focuses on approachability the critique of consumption doesn’t fit right in the place because of many reasons, including the definition of pop-art. The definition also supports the notion of advertising, as in the artworks of Andy Warhol, the Campbell’s Soup Cans (figure 4), which



figure 4. Campbell's Soup Cans by Andy Warhol, 1962

highlights the fast-accessed products to consume. Similar to Istanbul Biennial's posters (figure 3), the artwork of Andy Warhol also carries the logo of a company which raises the question of how efficient the methodology is to criticize the consumption and the spectacle. Comparing its point of emergence

and its progress, the pop-art starts with the criticism of consumption with the lead of Hamilton and deviates from its aim transforming into a spectacle where Andy Warhol becomes a “star” of this spectacle. Warhol’s saying “Making money and good business is the best art” also proves the point of still valuing the commodity besides the intrinsic value. Turning back to the mechanism, pop-art tries to put the observer and accessibility, the empathy and the process of production of the artwork back on focus, whereas its effort to criticize consumption doesn’t fit in the context because of highly appreciating the commodity and consumption. The pop-art movement put a finger on the issue of accessibility and monopolized art world by the elitist approach of institutionalization. However, the fast and the “*expendable*” art according to Hamilton lead other movements to emerge with a tight relationship with commodity such as kitsch. Walter Benjamin describes kitsch as “unlike art, a utilitarian object lacking all critical distance between object and observer; it offers instantaneous emotional gratification without intellectual effort, without the requirement of distance, without sublimation.”¹¹ In other words, kitsch is faked experience which demands only the money without arousing any interests or enthusiasm. The only thing that matters is the notion of owning the popular. On the level of the observer, this also distances the observer from the process of producing, vanishing the sense of empathy for the work which reduces the work into a product lacking aura and authenticity. The emergence of kitsch shows that even though pop-art created a deviation and a critique to institutionalization and consumption, the evolution of it combined with kitsch had fed today’s dynamics of society in terms of advertisement and consumption of art. The kitsch becomes the spectacle. In pop-art and kitsch the notion commodity and the object are highlighted in the critique to disrupt the on-going mechanism. On the other hand, other resistances appear in the timeline, unlike Warhol, the artworks highlight the ideas and the acts which make art out of the matter such as *arte povera*, *fluxus*, *happenings*.

Resistance B: the Situationist International and the Happenings

If the critique of institutionalization stems from distancing a part of society from art and the artist while valuing the monetary aspect of art rather than its intrinsic value, the offered notion of institutionalization and its mechanism should engage with the social dynamics and its demands and highlight the process of production. That is where the Situationists step in with the attitude of recuperation. With the leadership of Guy Debord Situationist International emerged in 1957 intending to subvert the ongoing system of the spectacular consumerist homogeneity and the alienated society. The idea as the title reflects, is to resist the situations formed by the dynamics and the authorities.¹² In “Preliminaries Toward Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program” Debord and Pierre Canjeur write “art is purely and simply coopted by capitalism as a means of conditioning the population. At the other pole, capitalism grants art as perpetual privileged concession: that of pure creative activity -an isolated creativity which serves an alibi for the alienation of all other activities.”¹³ Situationists support the idea that art becomes an isolated tool of capitalism that numbs the dynamics of the society while alienating art from other quotidian activities creating a “spectacle” from it.

According to Situationists, the notion of institutionalization also highlights poverty within commodity and consumption such as the material poverty, poverty of human contact and the poverty of the intrinsic value of the artwork. According to Wyma, “the situationists argued, social alienation had colonized not only production but all facets of an everyday life increasingly organized around administrated leisure and consumption”.¹⁴ That is where the subversive approach of the Situationists and the notion of institutionalization collides. With “happenings” Situationists attempt to enrich the “situations” which can only be formed with ideologies, authenticity and the aura. Because of focusing on “the game” instead of the product, the subversive critique of the SI distinguishes from the Pop-art. The power of acting and the emergence of the idea *Homo ludens* to oppose the idea of institutionalization shows how the SI criticizes the rationality, bureaucracy, and the focus of object in



figure 5. “Improved” Marlboro billboard at North Sydney as a detournement

the field of art. The playful approach comprises momentary ambiances and dematerialized performances such as psychogeography maps to explore the city, *detournements* (figure 5), and *derives* which embodies the core idea of the happenings. This approach of the SI is influential for the dynamics of the society and the mechanism. As a result, the created situations disrupt the shiny idea of the spectacle and revealed the spectacles as alienated superficial fictions. Setting a practical force on motion as the embodiment of an idea is essential to destroy the society of the spectacle. The happenings allow people to participate, enrich the interaction and make the observer re-discover the empathy or the critical thinking towards a formation. The approach which is far from the idea of institutionalization due to being rather spontaneous and valuing the process of production increases the notion of authenticity. In this way, commodity and consumption devalues with the acknowledgement of the happenings.

When looked from the perspective of art, the SI adds the interaction to the mechanism which reminds the observer the intrinsic value of art which triggers the empathy and provocation through the process of production of the artwork. This change in the field of art adds new wheels to the mechanism and enables the mechanism to process with more spontaneous input besides rationality and bureaucracy. Moreover, it also ignores all the in-between authorities embedded in the mechanism of institutionalization, shortening the way from the artist to the observer, preserving authenticity of the artwork.

The May 1968 events, which is an uprising that began with student protests at Sorbonne against consumption, institutions and capitalism, is the macro scale influence of the SI. In history the uprising is seen as a social and cultural cornerstone of France. May 1968 uprisings are outcomes of the Situationist approach that raises questions on the present hierarchy, the accustomed mechanism of institutionalization and alienation of the society. The realization of the suppression and bureaucratic management of art and culture questions the dynamics of the society and the SI movement becomes a tool for expression with creative graffiti, posters, slogans and performances. As a matter of fact, the May 1968 events and its relation to the SI is an example of how interrelated the art, the dynamics of the society, economy and institutionalization are. It is important to see that one addition or subtraction to the mechanism effectively changes the organization of the whole parameters which can become a national scale incident in terms of expression (figure 1). The aftermath of the 1968 events shows that with this kind of a critique, new ideas questioning the capitalist order and consumerism begin to emerge and the Situationist movement recuperates the essence of authenticity and the intrinsic value of art by demystifying the “spectacle”.

Can art be managed?

After acknowledging a part of the journey of the institutionalization and the resistances, it is clear that with every action there is a reaction. This action-reaction relationship shows that the mechanism is ever-changing with its modifications. Although the emergence of pop-art and the SI subverted some of the lithified relationships such as the intervene of the public and the quotidian, it is not easy to vanish a wheel from the mechanism. However, the integration of the quotidian also enables the imagination and practice to be the essential parts of the process of production and display which would recuperate the perception of the spectacle while creating a more conscious and questioning society towards art and the museum.

The following diagrams (figures 6,7,8 and 9) visualize the evolution of the mechanism. They also represent how the art is affected by all the interventions. Today, because the society is still seen as a cyber machine that consumes, the mechanism of the institutionalization still exists. Even though resistances (A&B) put new interrelations, the lack of resilience of them is clear. So how can we manage something which is a pure form of expression and an integrative language for the society despite of its subjectivity?

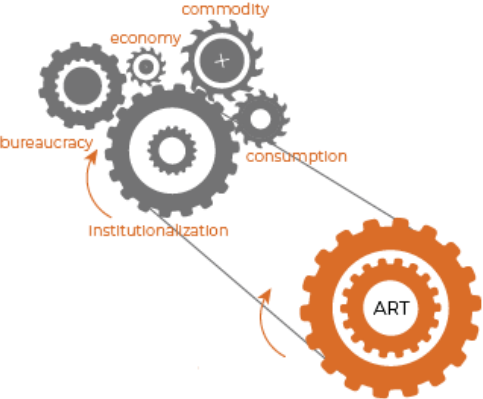


figure 6. Relationship of art and the institutionalization and its parameters within the mechanism -as institutionalization influences the turning point of art, the smaller wheels also have an effect on the bigger ones.

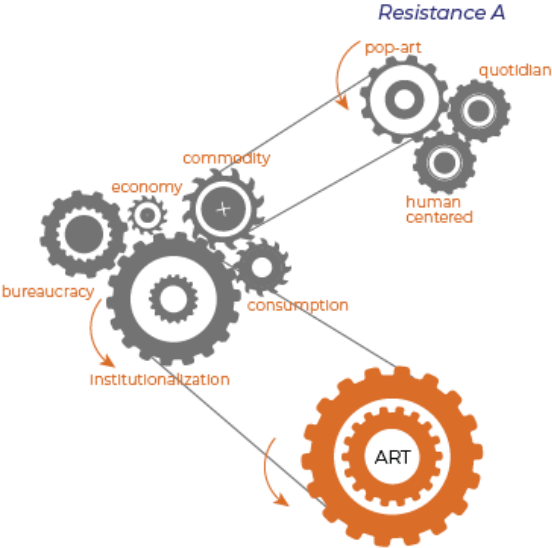


figure 7. The effect of Resistance A, and the re-valuing of the quotidian accessible by the society

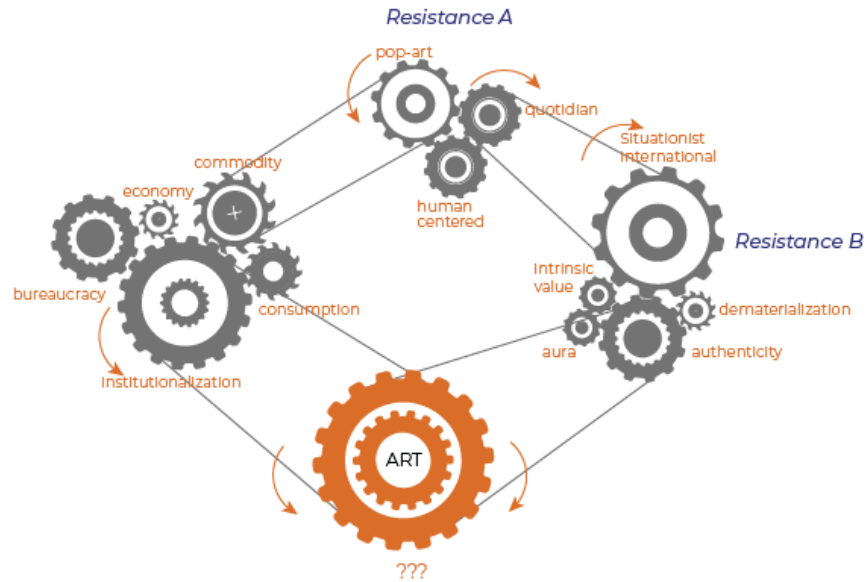


figure 8. The effect of Resistance B, and the reminder of the intrinsic value of art and its dematerialization by the society

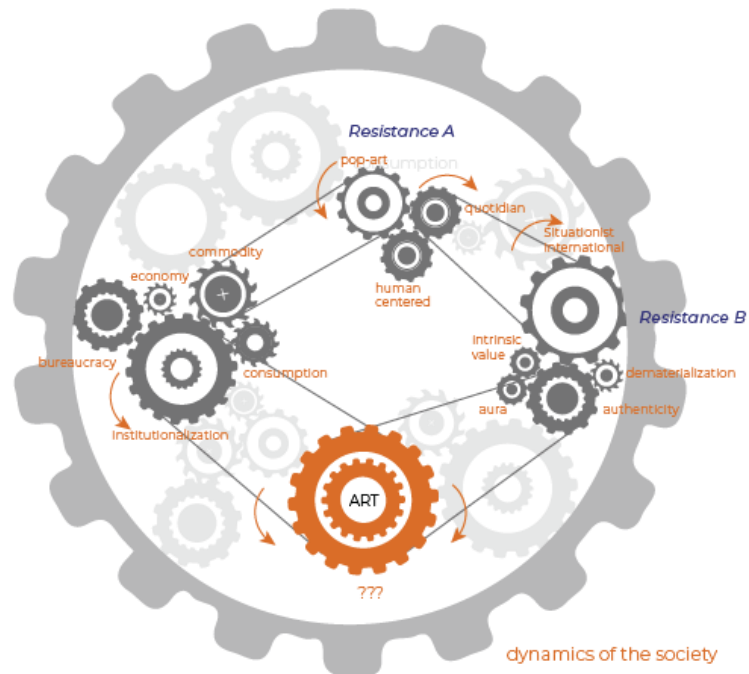


figure 9. Dynamics of the society as the bigger mechanism which comprises the smaller interrelations

It is crucial to understand that in order to highlight the intrinsic value of art, spontaneity, improvisation and the awareness raised by the public are cornerstones. To “manage” art one should acknowledge the fact that art can not be tamed if it expresses and influences. Therefore treating an artwork as a bank

check and the museums as markets would only feed the spectacle while creating a superficial effect on the art world. It should be acknowledged that “Although the extraordinary diversity of the institutions established for this purpose bears eloquent testimony to the flexibility of human nature's self-creation, this diversity is apparent only to the external observer, the ethnologist who looks back from the vantage point of historical time. In each of these societies a definitive organizational structure has eliminated any possibility of change.”¹⁵ as Debord suggests in Thesis 130. In order to allow change, which is crucial for the dynamics of the society, art should not be governed only by the institutions whose aim is consumption and the market. The mechanism should also feed from the quotidian to be open to change and the external possibilities led by the demands of the integrated society.

Conclusion

The absolute mechanism of institutionalization creates a distanced form of art lacking the intrinsic value. The trajectory of the notion of the spectacle forms the polished, sanitized and obscure museums that are not accessible by public. As the resistances also suggest, the mechanism shouldn't only comprise the logical, the popular, the spectacular but also the improvised, quotidian, dematerialized to recuperate the distance between the art, the artist, the observer and the space of display.

These three aspects come back in the discussion concerning the notion of institutionalization, Resistance A and Resistance B. The idiosyncrasy of art allows to make a room for the quotidian to involve the society. Art is flexible and resilient and this resilience has the power of changing the dynamics of the society from the spectacle to the quotidian. As architects, in order to create new atmospheres and opportunities, one should perceive this vicious mechanism as a possibility.

Therefore, instead of a subversive act towards the mechanism of institutionalization, a conscious approach that recuperates the mechanism should be offered. This recuperation should act on the discussed problems such as the distance between the art, artist and the observer. As much as the present dominant mechanism is the mechanism of institutionalization, with the implementation of improvisation to the current mechanism would allow a much more resilient system due to art being dynamic and the society being moldable. In the case of spontaneity and improvisation, a catalyst plays

an essential role. With the implementation of the catalyst into the mechanism new consequences emerge. However, these consequences are not in absolute control, such as a brush touching a canvas while painting which is planned but the outcome is not the expected for 100%. This small percentage of being out of control, as also the human nature and the nature of art suggests, is what makes the process of production and the new mechanism precious. Therefore, to recuperate the existing mechanism, the acknowledgment of spontaneity and improvisation is essential.

Turning back to the three aspects, the society, space and art, space becomes the primary step to proceed. Since the relationship between the dynamics of the society and the art including the artist is reciprocal, intervening one of the aspects can influence the other aspects. Even though today's society is a spectacle or a cybernetic machine which is programmed to consume, with the reciprocity it is possible to design spaces that puts improvisation on focus and change the approach towards the commodity notion of the art and display and the spectacle of the society by highlighting the "muse" of the museum and the intrinsic value of art.

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Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts. 13th and 14th Istanbul Biennial Poster. 2013-2015. Retrieved from <https://bienal.iksv.org/en/biennial-archive/13th-istanbul-biennial>

Figure 4. *Campbell's Soup Cans by Andy Warhol, 1962.*

Warhol, Andy, *Campbell's Soup Cans*, 1962, MoMA, New York, Retrieved from <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79809>.

Figure 5. *"Improved" Marlboro billboard at North Sydney as a detournement*

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Figure 6, 7, 8 and 9. Illustrated by the author

Notes:

¹ Cambridge Dictionary, "Institution."

² Cambridge Dictionary, "Institution." The secondary meaning.

³ Debord, *the Society of the Spectacle*, Thesis 1, 2.

⁴ Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Museum."

⁵ Artun, "Sanat Hayali, Yönetim Disiplini ve Sanat Yönetimi: Avangard ve Taylorizm.", Interview.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ali Artun, *Çağdaş Sanatın Örgütlenmesi: Estetik Modernizmin Tasfiyesi*, 129.

⁸ Thompson, *The \$12 Million Stuffed Shark: The Curious Economics of Contemporary Art*, 367.

⁹ Artun, 174.

¹⁰ Tate Modern. "Pop-Art."

¹¹ Andrew Benjamin and Charles Rice, ed., *Walter Benjamin and the Architecture of Modernity*. (Melbourne: re.press, 2009), 39–58.

¹² Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age*, 2.

¹³ Wyma, "Partial, Incoherent and Divided Imbeciles: The Situationist International and the Action.", 26.

¹⁴ Wyma, 33.

¹⁵ Debord, Thesis 130, 70.