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The role of cultural alter-institutions as  
radical actors in the contemporary art  
world:  
the case of Sale Docks in Venice

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Abstract</b> .....	1
<b>Introduction</b> .....	2
<b>CHAPTER 1:</b>	
<b>Institutions and Institutional Critique: a sociological framework</b> .....	6
1.1 Introducing art institutions from a sociological point of view .....	6
1.2 Institutional Critique .....	18
1.3 From the critique of existing institutions to the invention of new ones: the alter-institutional turn.....	28
<b>CHAPTER 2:</b>	
<b>On alter-institutionality: history, development and new perspectives</b> .....	35
2.1 From the white cube to alter-institutions .....	35
2.2 Acting from the margin.....	49
<b>CHAPTER 3:</b>	
<b>Alter-institutional practices in Venice: the case of Sale Docks</b> .....	65
3.1 Sale Docks: history and urban context .....	66
3.2 Interviews .....	86
<b>Conclusions</b> .....	108
<b>References</b> .....	112

# ABSTRACT

Can the inefficiency of the art world in proposing new political alternatives to pressing global issues be attributed to its structural institutionalization? And thus, can “alter institutions” be considered a potential solution to this issue?

This research aims to address these questions by examining alter-institutional realities within the contemporary art world. The objective is to understand whether institutions that operate outside established rules and norms governing official art spaces can truly provide a space of freedom where more radical political alternatives can emerge, and why. Adopting an approach relying on cultural studies and feminism, and in particular drawing inspiration from bell hooks’ concept of marginality (1989) as a “site of radical possibility and resistance”, this thesis explores the existing marginal spaces within the art world today, the way they confront the “centre” and the multiple dynamics at work. The sociological framework employed is therefore intersectional feminist theory, recognizing the margin as a location that guarantees a necessary oppositional view not only with respect to matters of class struggle but also considering and addressing all existing systems of oppression occurring in the “centre”, and acknowledging their interconnectedness. The study therefore considers so-called “alter-institutions” that operate against all boundaries set by race, gender and class, their responses to existing cultural practices and their “capacity to envision new, alternative, oppositional aesthetic acts” (hooks, 1989). After providing an introductory overview on concepts and approaches related to the thesis’ focus, this study examines the scenario of cultural alter-institutions in Venice, offering a tangible perspective on the subject. In particular, it delves into the artistic production processes within this context, specifically examining their connection to the city’s landscape and highlighting how these “non-institutions” and their practices contribute to and affect the politics of the city.

The final chapter of this study in fact explores the role and activities of one of the most active actors – falling under the definition of “alter institution” – present in Venice: the Sale Docks collective. The evidence discussed has been collected through qualitative interviews conducted with three active members of the collective.

# INTRODUCTION

The aim of this work is to explore the marginal spaces of art production within the contemporary cultural world, in order to understand if new, alternative, organizational models can emerge by assuming different perspectives. In order to achieve this objective, the work focuses on an analysis, both from a theoretical and practical point of view, of the genesis and evolution of the contraposing sociological concepts of institutionality and alter-institutionality, with the purpose of understanding their meaning and roles in contemporary societies. Starting from the assumption that the art world has, in recent years, been asked to engage and expose on a number of urgent global political issues, this work attempts to clarify whether cultural institutions have managed to do so effectively or not, together with reflecting on the potential reasons and mechanisms behind the results and evidence observed.

The first chapter, divided in three main parts, aims to provide a clear overview of the theoretical and historical framework around the concepts of “institution” and “institutional critique”. The first part of the chapter, in fact, provides a brief overview of the main sociological theories that have focused on explaining the role and meaning of institutionality, and the reasons behind the establishment of these entities in modern societies. The goal is thus to discuss the various theories seeking to explore what institutions are, what role they play and how they operate in the contemporary world and – mostly – how they have been studied and explained from a sociological perspective during time. This serves as an introductory passage in order to explain the dialectical relation that traditional institutions have with the central subject of the thesis, i.e., alter-institutions.

To explain the existing differences between these two notions and their practices, and thus provide a clear understanding of the work, however, it is first pivotal to analyse the traditional sociological theories that have been prominent in providing an answer to the general question: why do societies need institutions? The discussion thus presents the main ideas and beliefs sustained by a number of different sociological thoughts (namely: the functionalist view, conflict theory, the institutional approach and symbolic interactionism) and compares them, to provide a comprehensive understanding of the existing common and contrast points.

Consequently, the focus of the discussion shifts to explore how these sociological theories have studied the role of institutions acting within the cultural world. The aim is thus to explore the different theoretical views around the concept of institutions dealing with art production. The rest of the analysis is carried out from the perspective of Cultural Studies, viewing cultural institutions as paces of possibility, potentially serving two contrasting purposes: on the one hand, acting in favour of the preservation of the status quo, and on the other, representing a site of resistance to it.

The second part of the chapter delves on the concept of “institutional critique”, proposing an historical overview of the art practices that took place within this context starting from the 1960s. The rise of institutional critique practices is interpreted as the initial phase wherein individuals began to challenge the roles and actions of museums and cultural institutions within society. To explain the emergence and evolution of this approach, a comparison is drawn between two distinct phases: the first occurring in the 1960s and 1970s, and the second unfolding from the 1980s through the 1990s. Furthermore, the third section of this chapter delves into the theory of alter-institutionality, exploring the societal and historical transformations that led to what could be termed as a third wave of institutional critique. This so-called third wave brings about a new transversal idea of institutional critique that, coherently with alter-institutional practices – as intended within this analysis – not only overcomes the boundaries of the art field, but also exploits theoretical and practical realities specific of it to inspire a more general reflection on the complex and dynamic role of institutions within society.

The second chapter provides a historical and theoretical examination of the origin and development of the concept of alter-institutions. It studies its emergence in contrast to the prevailing notion maintained throughout large part of the 20th century, theorizing the neutrality of cultural institutions with respect to matters beyond the borders of art for art’s sake and aesthetic appreciation, epitomized by the ideology of the “white cube”. The argument sustained in this part of the work thus maintains that the contemporary panorama of cultural institutions is the result of an ongoing tension between what remains of the traditional view of the white cube and a more recent push for political participation. Cultural institutions thereby find themselves caught between two opposing forces: on the one side the pressure to take part in debates around

political global issues, and, on the other, being constrained by the financial and reputational “risks” that taking position inevitably entails.

The analysis then provides an overview of this development process: describing the mechanisms that progressively led to the emergence of new paradigms of alter-institutionality, positing that neutrality is illusory, as artworks are always exhibited in a specific context, serving as components of a discursive narrative, however “neutral” it may seem to be. Sustaining that cultural institutions are inherently and unavoidably political entities and recognizing their potential power in shaping reality and perpetuating or contrasting the status quo, thus opens up a new perspective on the potential role they play in the contemporary society. The argument supported draws from the theories of scholars such as Castoriadis, Deleuze and Negri and Hardt, and is built upon the idea that art institutions serve a transformative role within society, representing dynamic spaces of continuous self-exploration and from where alternative possibilities can be imagined and thus new realities can emerge.

This ongoing paradigm shift regarding the conception of art institutions in connection to society and politics reflects an effort to fundamentally alter the perspective on their inherent role with the aim of opening new horizons of possibilities within the institutional art space. Managing to overcome the conventional perspective around institutionality, this theory introduces a new definition which effectively incorporates what must be understood as the central meaning and primary role of so-called “alter-institutions”: the ability to imagine and realize new possibilities. Consequently, drawing on the work of Marco Baravalle – curator, activist and researcher in the fields of Visual Art And Curatorial Studies – a more practical definition of alter-institutional practices is provided: allowing to distinguish between two types: governmental and autonomous.

In the second part of the chapter, the idea of alter-institutionality is presented within the theoretical work of bell hooks on “marginality”. The thesis aims to give the concept a new perspective: looking at alter-institutions as entities taking action from the margin. Therefore, after introducing bell hooks’ work and views, that aligns with feminist black Cultural Studies, the paper discusses her perspective translating the dichotomy between the centre and the margin into the realm of cultural production, particularly within the concepts of cultural institutions and alter-institutions. In this

sense, so-defined autonomous alter-institutions are comparable to marginal entities: taking action outside of the centrality of the official institutional space, while still being in contact with it. This marginal perspective allows them to see simultaneously “from inside out and from outside in”, thus inspiring an oppositional view. They are thus called upon to take action, integrating theory and practice, as the primary catalysts for a revolution aimed at finally eliminating oppressive power hierarchies, responsible for having created the distinction between margin and centre in the first place.

The aim of the third and final chapter is to clarify the possibilities and challenges inherent in alter-institutional practices and actions through the analysis of a concrete example. Therefore, the analysis focuses on a case study, an alter-institution taking place in Venice and offering a comprehensive understanding of its role and actions in the ongoing redefinition of the contemporary. The subject at the centre of this analysis is Sale Dock, an independent cultural space funded after an occupation movement initiated by a group of activists (mostly workers and students within the cultural sector) in 2007, in Venice. The organization is analysed and understood within the alter-institutional context described in depth in the previous chapters. The chapter is structured in two main parts: the first consisting of an introduction to the history of the collective, with a focus and description of some of the actions and practices that have characterized it. This part of the research, therefore, represents an attempt to provide a practical, real-life application of the theoretical framework previously exposed. Particular relevance and attention are reserved to the relationship between Sale Docks and the general institutional cultural panorama of the city of Venice, representing a peculiar location, where the neoliberal institutional model of cultural production is particularly present (and thus its consequences particularly evident), being a relatively small city that nevertheless hosts a very large number of some of the most important international institutions in the field of contemporary art. The second part of the chapter, instead, reports and comments the qualitative data gathered through the three interviews conducted with some active members of the Sale Docks collective. This part is introduced with an explanation of the research method, selected on the basis of the desired aims of the research.

# CHAPTER 1

## **Institutions and Institutional Critique: a sociological framework**

### **1.1 Introducing Art Institutions from a sociological point of view**

Contemporary reality is institutionalised, meaning that every aspect of it is regulated by some kind of institution – defined as an established law or practice. For this reason, institutions in general and, more specifically, institutions operating in the art world, have long been studied by a number of scholars from a sociological point of view. In this first part of the chapter, a brief overview of the main theories is provided. In order to understand what alter-institutions are, what role they play and how they operate in the contemporary world, and the dialectical relation with traditional institutions, in fact, it is first necessary to provide a clear and exhaustive framework of how these institutions, in general, have been studied and explained from a sociological perspective during time. To do so, it is first pivotal to analyse the traditional sociological theories that have been prominent in providing an answer to the general question: why do societies need institutions?

One of the main perspectives that has focused its research mostly on this topic, trying to provide an answer to this question, is the so-called functionalist view. The functionalist perspective is one of the major theoretical views in sociology. Its origins lay in the work of Emile Durkheim, which aimed attention especially to the analysis of the mechanism that allow societies to obtain social order and stability, thus concentrating on the macro-level of social structure, rather than on the micro-level of everyday life, in order to explain how institutions connect and evolve. The theory, further developed between the 1930s and 60s, was built on the belief that institutions are necessary for the creation and perpetuation of a societal order (Holmwood, 2005). They are in fact understood as the result of a contract providing the terms, norms and values that are fundamental for a society to function. According to this view, therefore, social solidarity and cohesion can only be achieved and maintained through processes of socialization and learning of shared values and norms: i.e., through the establishment of institutions. This view thus emphasizes the constraining nature of social structures on individuals. According to the functionalist perspective, in fact,



institutions are the means through which shared norms and values are transmitted to society at large, thus allowing their sedimentation. This idea implies hence that institutions are necessary as they play a regulative role in society. Moreover, functionalism asserts that society transcends mere individual components, instead highlighting the interdependence of its elements for overall stability. In this regard, Durkheim compares society to an organism, where each constituent plays an essential role but cannot function in isolation, meaning that, in the event of a crisis for one of the elements, the others must adapt to fill the resulting gap (Durkheim, 1893). In the functionalist framework, different social institutions (e.g. family, government, economy, media, education, religion, etc.) are therefore made to fulfil distinct needs and their existence depends on their vital contribution to the general societal functioning. Functionalist theory posits that, when everything functions according to the established social norms, the various components of society ensure the perpetuation of order, stability, and productivity. On the other hand, in the event of conflict, societal elements must adapt and establish a new status quo. In this perspective, therefore, any disruption in the system, such as deviant behaviour, induce change as societal components realign to restore stability.

These aspects of the functionalist perspective have been significantly criticized from many sociologists belonging to the Conflict Theory school, as they tend to overlook the potential negative consequences of maintaining social order. The critics are focused on the fact that this perspective effectively legitimizes the existing status quo and the mechanisms of cultural hegemony<sup>1</sup> that uphold it. The direct consequence of the desirability of keeping order and balance is that individuals are in this way discouraged to actively engage in shaping their social environment, even when such involvement could bring about benefits and meaningful change. Instead, functionalism tends to view efforts to instigate social change as undesirable, assuming that the various components of society will naturally slowly adjust to address any issues that

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of cultural hegemony has been developed by the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci drawing from Karl Marx's theory. It is the idea that the dominant and shared beliefs in society forming the status quo – and thus appearing to be natural and inevitable – are instead a social construct artificially made up by the ruling class for their benefit only. According to this view, promoting hegemonic values and beliefs is a mechanism aimed at reinforcing the prevailing ideology and strengthening the status quo.

may arise. Thus, while providing a useful framework for understanding stability and order, these criticisms highlight how it does not adequately account for the conflicts, complexities and social injustices existing within social structures. On the other hand, Conflict Theory, a prominent sociological perspective first developed by Karl Marx, provides a more critical view of institutions' role within society. According to this theory, in fact, institutions are not neutral entities serving the common good, but are instead shaped by power dynamics and governed by the interests of dominant groups, who use them as means to perpetuate social inequalities and reinforce the status quo. This perspective therefore is in contrast with functionalism as it underscores the need for social change and for the dismantling of oppressive structures within institutions as means to achieve a fairer and more equitable society (Giddens and Sutton, 2021).

As art institutions represent a distinctive subset within the larger institutional landscape, some differences may occur with respect to the analysis of other kind of institutions. For this reason, it can be useful to consider them as a separate topic of research. Therefore, the focus of this part of the chapter will shift to explore sociological perspectives that have dedicated a specific look at and developed a particular thought on institutions operating within the art world, thus addressing the question “what is the role and meaning of art institutions in a society?”. Drawing from the ideas of the conflict theory explained above, the Frankfurt School, a group of critical theorists active in the early to mid-20th century, offered a unique perspective on cultural institutions. They in fact believed that cultural institutions, including the artistic ones, played a crucial role in shaping and controlling society; recognizing them not just as neutral platforms for the dissemination of information or entertainment but, on the contrary, as tools used by dominant elite groups to maintain control and manipulate the masses (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1947). This analysis concerned culture in general, with a specific focus on the role of mass media. Institutions working in this context were thus perceived as tools for ideological control, shaping public opinion and reinforcing power dynamics of domination. The aim of Frankfurt School scholars was thus to call for a critical analysis of these institutions and to shed light on their impact on individual consciousness. They believed that, in order to achieve genuine autonomy and social transformation, it was necessary for society members to break free from the grip of these cultural institutions. This theory therefore focused its

research on the political role that cultural institutions and their products could play in the general societal hierarchies. Instead, a more specific and “micro-level” perspective on the subject was provided by the so-called institutional approach, notably exemplified by Howard Becker's contributions (1982) suggesting that an object's designation as art depends on its integration into the institution known as the “art world”. Following this theory, the American philosopher George Dickie defines a work of art as: “(1) an artifact (2) a set of the aspects of which has had conferred upon it the status of candidate for appreciation by some person or persons acting on behalf of a certain social institution (the artworld)” (1974, p. 431). According to this perspective, therefore, it is the context in which an object exists that fundamentally shapes its artistic identity. The “artworld”, encompasses a diverse array of agents, including museums, artists, curators, collectors, critics and galleries who influence the discourse surrounding art, conferring legitimacy to selected creations through the recognizing of a certain *status*, which is that of being a candidate for aesthetic appreciation (Buekens and Smit, 2018). Therefore, no exhibited or intrinsic or natural quality is responsible for making an object considered worthy of artistic value. This idea was sustained by the American art critic Arthur Danto (1964) who made use of Andy Warhol's Brillo Boxes as an example in support of these institutional accounts. According to Danto, the fact that Warhol's Boxes were exact copies of ordinary Brillo boxes demonstrates the importance of institutional legitimation of objects as art. He argues that the only and decisive difference between the two objects was that the Stable Gallery – an established art institution in Manhattan where Warhol's Boxes were first exhibited – functioned as “an ingredient of the art world” (Buekens and Smit, 2018, p. 55), conferring to the boxes the status of work of art.



*Figure 1: American pop artist Andy Warhol (1928 - 1987) stands amid his towering Brillo box sculptures in the Stable Gallery (33 East 74th Street), New York, New York, April 21, 1964. Photo by Fred W. McDarrah/MUUS Collection via Getty Images.*

This perspective goes hand in hand with the sociological theory of symbolic interactionism: a micro-level framework focusing on individual interpretations, actions and reactions taking place in specific social situations. Thus, applying these premises to social interactions happening in the art world, the institutional approach is founded on the belief that the specific contextual situation has a fundamental effect on the recognition of the artistic value of objects. To make a comparison with the functionalist approach discussed above, it could be said that: whereas in that framework the institution is the condition under which societies exist (i.e. without institution – contract – there is no society), here the institution is the condition for the creation of meaning (the artistic value): there is no art without the art world. The use of the institution is consequently to create the context for the definition and recognition of what art is. However, contrary to Functionalism, this perspective does not imply the existence of an underlying stable structure (society and its norms) before social interactions. Being it based on a phenomenological idea of social structures, it does not imply the existence of any common truth to refer to. Instead, society is perceived to be continuously made through and shaped by individual interactions. Therefore,

another difference that can be stressed between the two theoretical frameworks is that the institutional view does not believe in a static society but instead provides for the possibility of societal change.

In the article “Cultural Entrepreneurship in Nineteenth-Century Boston: The Creation of an Organizational Base for High Culture in America”, Paul Dimaggio (1982a) conducts a research aimed at understanding and explaining the reasons behind the process of institutionalization of culture in Boston in the years between 1850 and 1900. He focuses in particular on two specific examples: the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the Museum of Fine Arts. He argues that one of the main results of this process was the definition of parameters that provided a distinction between what has since then been perceived as “high culture” on the one hand, and “pop culture” on the other. According to Dimaggio, this was the result of a strategy put in action by an elitist group of so-called “cultural capitalists” who started a process of definition of the boundaries between these two kinds of artistic proposals. The first step was to isolate the so-defined “high culture” in order to differentiate it from entertainment culture. This was done with the aim of setting cultural boundaries between high and low social classes, in a perspective of self-affirmation of an elite and creation of a stronger group identity. Moreover, it was as well a way to affirm their position as dominant class and establish a hegemonic relationship with the oppressed lower classes. Dimaggio explains the process that led to the creation of officially recognized art institutions through the implementation of what he describes as a real entrepreneurial strategy: the creation of an organizational form that members of the elite could control and govern.

The institutions were artificially built with the aim of defining strong and clear boundaries between high art and entertainment. This organizational model has, from that moment on, not only influenced artists’ careers and degree of success, but also shaped the nature of the artworks created as well as defined the norms of behaviour for the public of different cultural institutions. The paper provides a list of three objectives that the dominant class in Boston had to accomplish in order to create an “institutionalized high culture”. The first consists in what Dimaggio calls “Entrepreneurship”, i.e. the creation of an organizational structure they could control. The second project is referred to as “Classification”, which implies drawing clearly defined boundaries between the two forms of culture, in order to create the idea of a

high art that could be appropriated by the members of the elite and associated with them by the other lower classes. Finally, using the term “Framing”, the author refers to the emergence of “a new etiquette of appropriation”, characterizing a new, differentiated way of approaching different forms of art. The two examples provided in the paper concern two different art institutions which, despite a few differences in the process of establishment, share a number of features, thus providing evidence in support of the author’s theory.

The foundation of the Museum of Fine Arts was the result of the will of an elitist group of citizens of Boston to create an institution that concentrated a number of important collections of artworks in one single place. On the contrary, at the beginning, the Boston Symphony Orchestra was the product of the work of one single person: Henry Lee Higginson, an entrepreneur with a central position in the social and economic elite class of Boston. Both organizations were therefore deeply rooted in a social class. Indeed, it is fair to say that both structures were actually built around the group that not only governed them, but also was representative of the public taking part in their events. Using Dimaggio’s words: “they were the creations of a densely connected self-conscious social group intensely unified by multiple ties among its members based in kinship, commerce, club life and participation in a wide range of philanthropic associations” (p. 390).

The second part of this article, published with the title: “The Classification and Framing of American Art”, goes on to explain the processes of delineation of “cultural boundaries”, defined as “boundaries between cultural forms that also serve to define and to maintain boundaries among people, since shared tastes and cultural experiences provided a fundamental source of feelings of solidarity to participants in social groupings.” (Dimaggio, 1982a, p. 303). According to the author, in fact, cultural categories reflect social inequalities, transforming them from social constructs to natural distinctions. In order to obtain strong classifications, however, different kinds of cultural proposals must be highly “ritualized”, i.e., characterized by “differentiating rituals” (p. 304) acting as a device that allows identification and self-recognition of individuals as part of a shared culture. At the same time, this also includes defining the elements of distinction among different groups in order to facilitate the recognition of eventual outsiders. For this reason, one of the most important steps in the process of

creation of a “high culture” has been the construction of an ideological and ritual framework that conferred it an aura of sacredness, mainly obtained through the estrangement from contact with pop (or profane) culture. To better explain this concept, the author provides some examples of crucial decisions that have contributed to the delineation and characterization of the two genres (high and popular). One of these is the introduction of popular programs of light music concerts as a profitable, profane summer supplement to the more serious winter schedules of the Symphony Orchestra. These light music concerts were not only classified as less cultured and intellectually challenging, but were also intentionally presented in a more liberal way. In contrast to the rules applied during winter concerts, in fact, in these occasions alcohol and tobacco consumption was allowed inside the theatre and there was no requirement for particularly quiet or decorous behaviour. This implied the development of a code of conduct as a fundamental part of the project of sacralization of high art. Moreover, throughout the Orchestra’s early years, Higginson repeatedly attempted to eliminate any commercial element from its affairs, seeking to increase the ritual value even at the risk of generating a lower profit. This decision was in fact made with the purpose of endowing the institution with a status of exclusivity, thus distancing its perceived image from the idea of an organization offering products accessible to mass audiences (Dimaggio, 1991). The idea of a hierarchical culture was only established and legitimized when the taste of elites was closely associated with a clearly articulated ideology: i.e., when the taste of elites became associated with “the high culture model”. This idea can be associated and read in the context of Bourdieu’s theory of taste (1979): defined as a “social weapon”, an instrument that enables people to distinguish the high from the low, the sacred from the profane, and the “legitimate” from the “illegitimate”. For Bourdieu, having a specific taste means possessing a mastery of codes – depending on one’s habitus (i.e., one’s embodied and performative way of acting in society) –that shapes art perception<sup>2</sup>. As a matter of fact, later on, due

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<sup>2</sup> In “Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste” (1979), Bourdieu defines taste as a “system of schemes of perception and appreciation” (p. 171). Taste is therefore something that individual have but not as an innate property, more as an acquisition depending on their possession of various forms of capital, namely economic, cultural, social and symbolic. Moreover, it affects people’s lifestyle choices, which, according to Bourdieu include both ownership of material objects but also consumption habits in terms of symbolic goods – which

to a series of internal and external tensions, both institutions were then forced to make compromises, granting partial access to members of the lower classes, thus expanding their markets and including, as anticipated above, pop proposals to their schedules in order to increase profits. This was thus an incomplete attempt that, nevertheless, succeeded in the pursuit of establishing a powerful ideological and organizational model (Dimaggio, 1991).

For what concerns Dimaggio's view on the reasons that led the elite to initiate this model, he goes against the traditional Marxist theory which explains the creation of a "high culture" as part of a plan of class domination, brought forward by higher classes to establish and strengthen their control over the masses. On this concern, he explains that the reason why he does not fully support this view relies on the presence of pressures from other lower classes and from the State against the construction of this organizational model. The author, in fact, taking a more Weberian stand point<sup>3</sup>, argues that the main reason behind this process was a need of auto-affirmation of the elite as a group, achieved through the definition of a collective class identity. The need to be legitimized by outsiders, in fact, made it impossible for the elite to create a completely obscure and mystical culture; instead making it necessary to adopt a more inclusive approach, where some parts of this new culture had to be shared. The tension between monopolization and hegemony, between exclusivism and legitimacy, has therefore posed some constraints to the attempts of the American urban elite to classify itself as a distinct and recognized (both by itself and by other external individuals) class. It can be therefore argued that Dimaggio, in this sense, also provides some

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need to be understood in order to be appropriated, thus requiring the possession of a specific taste.

<sup>3</sup> Weber's theory on conflict extends beyond Marxist traditional beliefs as it maintains that conflict in society is generated by a number of different factors, and not exclusively by matters of class. He therefore provides a more stratified model that considers three main forms of inequality: social, political and economic. Moreover, he introduces the notion of "status" (1922), implying that social interactions between individuals in society (including conflict), do not always cause social change, but, on the contrary, might as well contribute to the reinforcement of existing power relations, supporting existing beliefs and promoting solidarity between individuals and groups within a society. As a consequence of this, therefore, individuals' reactions to power hierarchies depend on many factors and not only on economic differences. Thus, power can be acquired by different people for different reasons and must always be legitimized in order to be maintained.



support to the institutional theory of art. In this context it is in fact the institution that confers to certain objects a *status* and, additionally, determines the characteristics that allow some selected social groups to possess the capability to recognize and appropriate it. In this way, the cultural institution constitutes the organizational structure that gives to art its symbolic meaning.

To better explain this concept, the author provides an important distinction between cultural capital and cultural resources. He argues that the former refers to cultural assets of prestige, i.e., objects that have been selected and legitimized by an institution. Whereas, he refers to the latter as indicating any kind of symbolic capacity that may be useful in a determined relational context. Following these definitions, therefore, it can be derived that the difference between the two is not intrinsic to the specific symbolic good in question; but, instead, it is supported by an authoritative institutional system: cultural capital and cultural resources must be distinguished empirically through the collective action of an elite.

In the paper “Institutions and the Artworld – A Critical Note” Filip Buekens and JP Smit (2018) advance a critic to institutional theory, challenging the core belief that defines the art world itself as an institution. They argue:

Our contention is that the artworld cannot be a social institution, although the artworld as we know it and as it has historically developed surely has created numerous types of institutions. This is because art, like any other activity that attracts interaction among humans, requires that coordination problems be solved and stable equilibria be found and maintained. The emergence of coordination problems and finding (or stumbling upon) stable solutions, however, is extrinsic to the phenomenon of making and appreciating art that form arguably the core of the artistic sphere of activity. (p. 57)

In their view, the role and purpose of institutions is to solve coordination problems and collective action dilemmas providing possible solutions to existing issues that may occur. Institutions are defined as “systems of interconnected rules” (p. 58) aimed at achieving shared goals through the transmission of standardized codes, messages and symbols that stabilize behavior thus making certain joint activities less demanding and more predictable. On this concern, they go on explaining:

We know very well what the role of a museum (qua type of institution) is – how it coordinates interaction between visitors, curators, artists, sponsors, and philanthropists; but it is not the role of the museum to create objects of artistic appreciation. [...] We pointed out that institutions are instrumental in bringing about pre-institutional shared and complementary social interests in an orderly and economic fashion. (p. 60)

In this way, the two authors challenge the fundamental idea of the institutional theory of art, i.e., the belief that the primary scope of cultural institutions is to confer (or not) artistic value to objects, which thus perceives institutions not as coordinating structures but as defining ones.

In summary, a key distinction emerges concerning the role of cultural institutions in society, allowing for the categorization of the various approaches discussed above into two broad groups. The fundamental disparity lies in the perceived necessity of institutions within societal structures. In the first case, in fact, institutions are perceived as founding and indispensable entities, in the sense that, without them art would cease to exist (Institutional theory and Dimaggio). Conversely, in the latter, the constitutions of institutional structures are considered a pragmatic response to a specific need. The nature of this need varies depending on the theoretical framework under consideration. According to the approach supported by Buekens and Smit, in fact, it involves addressing coordination challenges in complex environments. In contrast, the Frankfurt school contends that the need is political, serving a specific group's imperative to ensure the perpetuation of its position of power.

Having laid the theoretical basis necessary to go on with an analysis of institutional and counter institutional art spaces, aimed at understanding their role in contemporary society, in the next chapters, this thesis will refer to and draw inspiration from the basic sociological framework provided by Cultural Studies as a field of academic inquiry approaching cultural institutions from a critical and multidisciplinary standpoint. Rather than viewing cultural institutions as neutral or functional, in fact, Cultural Studies scholars adopt an alternative perspective, analysing them simultaneously as sites of power, contestation, and ideological influence. In this regard, in fact, they argue that, being deeply embedded in power relations, cultural institutions often tend to

reflect and reinforce the interests of a particular group in society, thus contributing to the perpetuation of existing social hierarchies and inequalities (Johnson, 1986).

Moreover, this framework does not support the neutral idea of “art value” as something natural and given. Arguing that “the naked eye does not exist”<sup>4</sup> in fact, these scholars sustain that shared values and norms only reflect constructed narratives of how reality is performed in a particular moment (Hall, 1973). Cultures therefore, are seen as forms of social identification and representation. It is thus in this way that art institutions, in producing and reproducing cultural meanings, reinforce existing inequalities. However, in contrast to the theoretical framework provided by the Frankfurt School, this perspective does not understand inequality only as a dichotomous opposition between a dominant and a dominated part, recognizing the complexity and polyhedric nature of power dynamics and of cultural hegemony. In this context, therefore, power is not recognized as something exclusively depending on one’s possession of the means of production, but it is instead understood as a hegemonic concept, which must be achieved through negotiation and consensus. Consequently, Cultural Studies acknowledge that conflict is multifaceted and involves all parties, meaning that, depending on the context considered, individuals and groups could alternately occupy both dominant and dominated positions. This also implies that dominion is never complete as power dynamics are fluid and can always be subverted through actions of resistance. A strong emphasis is therefore placed both on individual and group agency: traditional hierarchies in fact can always be challenged and new power dynamics can be negotiated through the active engagement of communities. Cultural institutions are therefore analysed as spaces of possibility, potentially serving two contrasting purposes. In fact, while on one hand they may act in favour of the preservation of the status quo, on the other, they can represent a site of resistance to it.

In support of this analysis, Stuart Hall – one of the initiators of this perspective – defines institutional spaces as “critical site of social action and intervention, where power relations are both established and potentially unsettled” (Procter and James,

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<sup>4</sup> This concept was originally expressed by Bourdieu in order to explain how perception is always influenced by single individuals’ characteristics and thus how there is no such thing as objectivity in value attribution and recognition.

2004, p. 2). By unpacking power relations, scrutinizing representation, and recognizing the potential for resistance, Cultural Studies offers valuable insights into how these institutions shape our worldviews and impact social dynamics.

Starting from this general introductory overview of some sociological perspectives providing a critical analysis of art institutions in society, the next part of the chapter will focus on “institutional critique”. This concept is explained through an historical review of the art practices that took place in this context starting from the 1960s. The aim of this section will be to provide an explanation of the reasons behind the emergence of this approach, while also focusing on the differences and similarities between the two phases that have characterized it. This will serve as an introduction to the third and last part of the chapter, which will instead focus on the new developments and evolutions of institutional critique.

## **1.2 Institutional Critique**

In his 1978 lecture: “What is Critique?” Michel Foucault describes how people living in the sixteenth century Europe had started to reflect on the concept of governmentality. He claims that in this setting, critique also emerged as a result of an inquiry on the possibilities of government: what the author calls “the art not to be governed like that” (Raunig, 2008). This shift signs the birth of a critical attitude – put in act through a limitation and challenge to the “art of governing” – allowing to overcome the dualism between being governed and not and thus opening a new horizon of possibilities. In Foucault’s words:

So, this governmentalization, which seems to me to be rather characteristic of these societies in Western Europe in the sixteenth century, cannot apparently be dissociated from the question “how not be governed?” [...] I mean that, in this great preoccupation about the way to govern and the search for the ways to govern, we identify a perpetual question which could be: “how not be governed like that, by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them.” And if we accord this movement of governmentalization of both society and individuals the historic dimension and breadth which I believe it has had, it seems that one could approximately locate therein what we could call the critical

attitude. Facing them head on and as compensation, or rather, as both partner and adversary to the arts of governing, as an act of defiance, as a challenge, as a way of limiting these arts of governing and sizing them up, transforming them, of finding a way to escape from them or, in any case, a way to displace them. (Foucault, 1997, pp. 44-45)

According to Boris Buden (2006), the practice of criticism – criticism *in actu* – can be defined as “a will for radical change, in short, the demand for a revolution” (p. 33). Disregarding thus the theoretical line of modern criticism<sup>5</sup> and focusing instead on its practical-political dimension, it can be said that this approach further developed as a product of the ideas of the Enlightenment. The struggles that characterized the political history of Europe in the eighteenth-century can be therefore read as part of a long process that saw the bourgeoisie class put in question traditional institutions: knowledge, religion and the absolutist state. According to this view, revolution, in fact, was nothing but the practical application of this newly developed critical attitude. Therefore, it can be argued that the development of a critical approach is significantly linked to a political revolutionary feeling pushing for change. In this context, the elaboration of art criticism played a pivotal role, contributing to the definition of canons that allowed the distinction between “old” and “new”. Thereby, it shaped a new understanding of the future, not only with respect to values applicable to the artworld (art criticism) but also pushing to question general norms beyond its own realm, revealing how the existing order did not fulfil its potential and thus inducing a need for change.

Throughout history, there have been a number of groups of artists that have explicitly focused their research on this specific subject. Later, these “movements” have been historicized under the definition of “institutional critique”. Generally, indeed, the term institutional critique is used to describe a range of diverse artistic productions and discourses starting from the 1960s. Many scholars have argued that it is possible to distinguish between two specific “phases” in this context (Alberro and Stimson, 2009; Raunig and Ray, 2009). The first occurring between the 1960s and 1970s. And the second taking place approximately 20 years later, between the late

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<sup>5</sup> This sentence refers to criticism as a theoretical subject firstly initiated by Immanuel Kant, by questioning the conditions of knowledge as an act of criticism of reason.

1980s and 1990s. Despite presenting a number of differences both in their aims, beliefs and in the means adopted – which will be explained later in this chapter – most of the art practices considered to be part of these two waves have some points in common (Raunig, 2006). First of all, in both cases, institutional critique was a practice mainly, if not exclusively, conducted by artists. Secondly, the object of criticism was the art institution as a representative of its failed social function and as a conditioning structure for artists and artworks. As a consequence, either of these moments of critique was concerned with matters limited to what could be defined, referencing Bourdieu’s definition, as the “art field”<sup>6</sup>. Additionally, criticism was expressed through the use of art projects as the main method of protest.

The so-called “first wave” of institutional critique includes a number of actors which were not formally organized in an official movement. However, most of the practices that have been associated to this definition share the commitment to questioning the status quo of museums and other traditional art institutions, with the aim of opposing to, subverting or breaking out of these rigid frameworks (Raunig and Ray, 2009). These artistic movements began to challenge the extent to which art institutions were able to live up to the radical promises regarding the social purpose for which they were founded (Alberro and Stimson, 2009). During the Enlightenment, in fact, museums assumed a pivotal public function as bastions of knowledge, reason, and cultural education. Emerging in the 18th century as part of the broader intellectual and philosophical movement, museums were seen as institutions dedicated to the cultivation of the public's intellect and moral character. During that time, scholars in fact believed that museums could play a fundamental role in fostering the democratization of knowledge and contributing to the progress of society by improving education and promoting shared values. The claim of artists was therefore that art institutions were not sufficiently committed to their original scope, thus being

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<sup>6</sup> This bourdiesian term refers to an autonomous and distinct “field of forces” including a variety of participating entities that interact with each other, struggling for the acquisition of power, legitimacy and recognition. His definition of art field (1996) therefore provides a sociological framework that allows the understanding of how production, distribution, and consumption of art are shaped by social and cultural forces. However, this definition also underlines how the art field is seen as a self-contained and independent space with respect to other external fields of social action, being regulated by its own norms and values.

incapable of fulfilling it. This view was rooted in the interpretation of cultural institutions as potential public spheres.

In the essay “The Institution of Critique” Hito Steyerl (2006) precisely explains the fundamental claims brought forward by these artists. First, relying on the assumption that art institutions are modelled after the political system of the nation state – i.e., representative parliamentarism – they required them to be representative of their citizens, just as political institutions should have been according to this model. For example, they demanded the inclusion of minorities and disadvantaged majorities in museums’ activities (both in organizational and decisional roles and as represented artists). In this regard, the Art Workers’ Coalition, an open collective including various figures working in art institutions – such as artists, museum staff, writers, critics, etc. – formed in New York in 1969, submitted to Bates Lowry, the director of the Museum of Modern Art at that time, a list of thirteen demands regarding the museum’s policies. The list included the request to establish a section of the Museum directed by black artists, to dedicate to their artistic accomplishments. Moreover, they voiced the claim to include in the activities of the museum also “the black, Spanish and other communities”, while fostering exhibits with which these groups could identify (Art Workers Coalition, 1969).

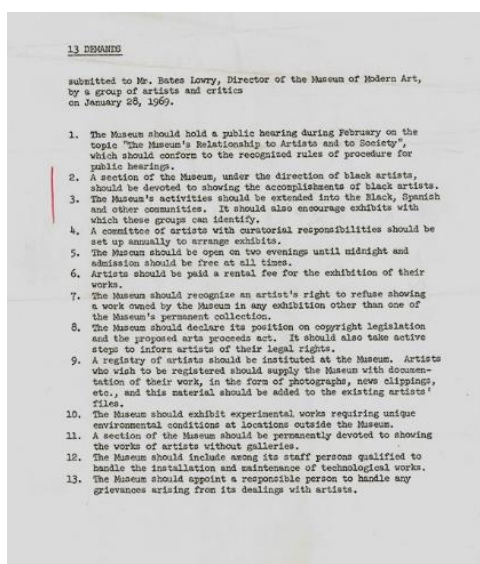


Figure 2: AWC “13 Demands.” Barr Papers, I.489. MoMA Archives, NY.

Moreover, challenging the authoritarian role of the institution within the context of the nation state, “institutional critique serves as a tool of subjectivation of certain social groups or political subjects” (Steyerl, 2006, p. 14). According to this view, in fact, museums were considered significantly responsible for the establishment and legitimation of the colonial national states (Anderson, 1983), having contributed to the promotion of the idea of a “common history” – deeply rooted in colonialist ideals. Artists such as Renée Green, James Luna, and Fred Wilson have highlighted through their work how cultural institutions have long represented “spaces of subjection” involved in the reproduction of white supremacy, and settler-colonialism. Their history and role as discriminatory institutions only accessible to an elitist privileged group was therefore recognized. A broader view on this idea is also provided by Daniel Buren’s in his essay “The Function of the Museum” (1970). The artist analyses how the actions performed by museums have often naturalized what is in fact historically and socially constructed. Additionally, he reflects on how the context and way in which art is installed and exhibited affects its perception, showing how institutions had long worked on denoting art spaces with an aura of sacredness and luxe, so to confer upon artworks both an economic and mystical value. Besides the display of art objects, other similar strategies – implemented by institutions to maintain this “aura” of sacredness – were recognized and denounced as discriminatory policies fostering social inequalities.

This is further exemplified in the work of the artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles. She in fact stresses how maintenance work in art spaces was completely hidden and carefully kept out of the public’s sight, despite being indispensable for the realization of exhibitions. This was problematic in two ways: first, as it allowed the institution of Art to keep its artificially constructed status of “sacred” space, somehow detached from the plane of reality. Secondly, as this kind of labour was most often gendered and/or raced; meaning that art institutions were *de facto* reproducing power dynamics and fostering mechanisms of inequality, while however trying to hide the evidence of their contribution to the perpetuation of the status quo<sup>7</sup>. This reflection opens the path

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<sup>7</sup> This idea is expressed by Mierle Laderman Ukeles in her “Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!” (1969) focusing on the hidden orders of the museum, specifically from the perspective of labor. Ukeles wants to emphasize the labor necessary for the installation and maintenance



to another of the main points of discussion advanced by the members of the first phase of institutional critique. In fact, they started to critically analyse the role played by art institutions in supporting hegemonic mechanism of social control and oppression, thus contributing to their sedimentation and perpetuation both within the art field and in society in general.

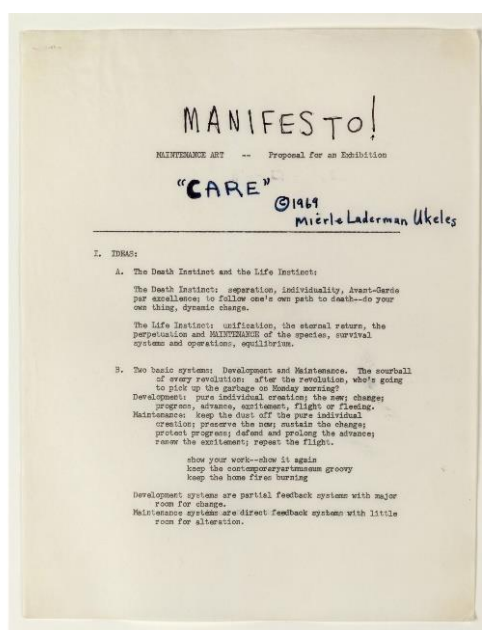


Figure 3: Mierle Laderman Ukeles, “MANIFESTO FOR MAINTENANCE ART, 1969! Proposal for an exhibition: “CARE”, 1969”, written in Philadelphia, PA, October 1969, Four typewritten pages, each 8 ½ x 11 in., Courtesy the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.

In “The Agent” (1977) Hans Haacke argues that the art world (influenced by the state) tends to exclusively support neutral art, while instead resisting to all works that may be considered somehow problematic or threatening to their economic interest. With this reflection he thus opens the discussion concerning another fundamental point: the critic against the subjugation of art institutions to economic interests and their dependency to the laws of the market. The artists taking part in the practice of institutional critique, in this way, shed light on the influence that the intersections between political, economic and ideological interests have when intervening on art production.

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of the site of an art exhibition, (such as painting, washing walls, sweeping and polishing floors, cleaning windows and vitrines).

Reviewing and analysing all the demands put forward by the artists included in the first wave of institutional criticism, it can therefore be claimed that, if on one hand, some of these practices aimed at promoting a complete closure and negation of an institutionalized art world, on the other, instead, there was a strong will of changing and improving art institutions. In this context, thus, it is fair to say that some of these artists maintained the strong belief that this kind of institutions could still play a potential positive role in society. The theorist Blake Stimson (2009) argues that “the role taken by artists engaged in institutional critique was deeply indebted to the old concepts of good and just institutionality” (p.33). This demonstrates how, in most cases, these practices did not question the structural existence of the institution itself, but rather maintained that the issues were to be recognized in the normalized conventions they promoted and that – at the same time – governed and defined them (Alberro, 2009). Institutional critique carried out during the 1960s and 1970s, therefore, used the tool of critical negation, as a means to achieve a process of reconciliation, which was expected to happen in the resulting debate. It aimed to revitalize the institution of art by emphasizing its need to adhere to its original principles: by advocating for a direct connection between the abstract scopes of museums and other institutions and their practical implementation in reality. Institutional critique thus preserved the integrity of the art institution by ensuring it remained faithful to its foundational ideals. In the words of Alberro:

They dialectically negated that which was the vehicle of their voice, and yet held on it at the same time. That kind of critical dialogue is the modernist moment, enlightenment moment, the moment of the attempted production of publicness within the established institutions of the public sphere. (p. 4)

He continues arguing that even the acts of negation performed by the artists, which involved challenging established art conventions, represented the essence of modernism as “it posited that the aesthetic exists in the critical exchange, in the debate, within the context of the art world” (p. 4). Moreover, he highlights how the process of critique has followed a dialectical approach, seeking to engage critically with the existing status quo, expecting that these interventions would catalyse real shifts in power dynamics, thus ultimately fostering positive change.

While maintaining similar premises and concerns, the so-called second wave of institutional critique broadened its scope, thus reflecting the evolution of the relationship between art and society. However, it is important to note that these phases are not rigidly defined, and that therefore there is often overlap within these institutional critique practices (Morariu, 2014). Both phases in fact share a common goal of questioning and challenging the status quo within art institutions. However, it is possible to discuss and delineate a distinction between the two as they do so with different emphases and approaches. The second generation of artists included under this definition emerged in the 1980s and early 1990s. They represent a plurality of positions that hold in common their exploration and questioning of all aspects of the process of artistic institutionalization. Even though the position of artists who tried to challenge institutions had not changed with respect to the previous generation of critique – i.e., they still perceived them as problematic and authoritarian – the general context in which they acted had changed. Hito Steyerl (2006) argues that the main difference with respect to the first wave was that “the claim that the cultural institution ought to be a public sphere was no longer unchallenged” (p. 16), meaning that economic performance had become an even more urgent priority for museums and galleries, which thus were (and were seen as) increasingly governed by the laws of the market. Additionally, the author argues that the foundation of supra-national institutions in those years (such as the European Union) provided also an alternative to the governmental model of the nation state, thus implying the development of a new alternative model of political representation as well. This new model was however more complicated and only partly representative, providing mainly symbolic rather than material representation to its citizens.

In this scenario, the objective of the critique shifted from the request of actual representation substituting it with a more symbolic one. To fulfil this request institutions tried to respond with the symbolic inclusion of underprivileged or unusual constituencies into museums, “just for the sake of ‘representation’” (p. 18). Another fundamental shift, allowing to make a distinction between these two phases, consists in the fact that, during the second one, the research was expanded, and a “subjectivizing turn” (Holmes, 2007, p.57) was added to it. On the one hand, in fact, institutional critique was not anymore a practice carried on exclusively by artists, but

it slowly started to involve also some critics and curators. The criticism, in this way, was now also coming from the inside of the institution itself. On the other hand, artists themselves started to recognize their role as actors operating within the institution. This enabled them to take a new perspective and put them in front of a double possibility: pretend to be independent subjects, only concerned with art for art's sake, or, on the other hand, acknowledge their power of action within the institutional structure, as well as beyond its boundaries, in the reproduction of external power structures.

This analysis thereby fostered a complex awareness of the simultaneous existence of various forms and directions of representation. It can be said, therefore, that the practice of institutional critique shifted from a direct confrontation to a more introspective and self-reflective analytical approach. Brian Holmes holds that this was the moment when critical practice started “taking itself for its object” (p. 58), meaning that the institutional framework had expanded enough to recognize also the subject performing the critique (the artist) as an institutionalized actor (Sheikh, 2006). In this regard, Andrea Fraser wrote her essay “From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique” (2005). In this paper, she acknowledges the important progresses and significant transformations achieved thanks to previous practices of institutional critique by unsettling and gradually eroding the foundations of the art institution. However, she goes on arguing that this same process led institutional critique to be absorbed by the institution itself. By making institutional critique an art subject discussed and displayed most often within institutional contexts, they, of course, did not escape the institution but brought more of the world into it. This analysis leads her to assert that all artists are “trapped” in their own art field, defining thus the art institution as an “unsurpassable, all-defining frame, sustained through its own inwardly directed critique” (Holmes, 2007, p.58). Referring to Bourdieu<sup>8</sup>, she writes:

But just as art cannot exist outside the field of art, we cannot exist outside the field of art, at least not as artists, critics, curators, etc. And what we do outside the field, to the extent that it remains outside, can have no effect within it. So, if

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<sup>8</sup> See note 6

there is no outside for us, it is not because the institution is perfectly closed, or exists as an apparatus in a “totally administered society”, or has grown all-encompassing in size and scope. It is because the institution is inside of us, and we can’t get outside of ourselves. (Fraser, 2005, p. 282)

Yet Fraser accepts this condition, marking another important distinction between this phase of institutional critique and the previous one: the adoption of a more collaborative and dialogical approach with institutions. From institutional critique, therefore, it starts to develop a new, self-reflective, institution of critique. The central concern shifts from outright opposition towards institutionality to cultivating an awareness of one's role within it. This implies recognizing individual and collective agency within the institution, considering aspects such as: “what kind of institution we are, what kind of values we institutionalize, what forms of practice we reward, and what kinds of rewards we aspire to” (p. 283). According to Fraser’s view, because institutionality is already internalized and embodied by the professionals working closely within the system, a meaningful critique can be carried out only by adopting a more introspective approach. Consequently, she advocates initiating the critique process by questioning one's own contributions and influence on the institution, thus fostering a more collaborative and self-aware engagement.

Gerald Runing, in his essay “Instituent Practices: Fleeing, Instituting, Transforming”, argues that the discourses and debates on institutional critique, despite trying to include wider social, political, and cultural concerns and related theories, often “only have the function of disposing of specific art positions or the art field” (2006, p. 5). Meaning that they have the limitation of being self-referential, i.e., only concerned with matters inside the art field. This argument, while being coherent with Fraser’s theory, goes against the position that accepts this as a given. Runing, in fact, maintains that a new horizon can be found going back to Foucault’s concept of critique: i.e., the critical attitude. He in fact supports that this concept should be applied practically to a new form of art (considered in its broader meaning) which should then lead to escaping the *arts of governing*, as primarily argued by Foucault (1978). Foucault in fact paved the way for the introduction of new non-escapist terms of escape, defined as “figures of flight, of dropping out, of betrayal, of desertion, of

exodus” (Raunig, 2006, p. 6). These figures have later been advanced by several authors, laying the basis for the constitution a new, third wave of institutional critique.

The next part of this chapter is therefore dedicated to the analysis of these new “poststructuralist, non-dialectical forms of resistance in refusal of cynical or conservative invocations of inescapability and hopelessness” (Rauning, 2006, p. 6). These models are non-dialectical in that they both go against positions imagining an absolute break out from institutions and – at the same time – against ideas supporting transformation processes aimed at a progressive convergence towards neo-liberal views; posing thus institutions in a positive space of creativity which allows a new form of “dropping out, a flight that is simultaneously an ‘instituent practice’” (p. 7). What we could define as third wave brings about a new transversal idea of institutional critique that not only overcomes the borders of the so-called field of art, but also exploits theoretical and practical realities specific of it to inspire a more general reflection on the complex role of institutions in general.

### **1.3 From the critique of existing institutions to the invention of new ones: the alter-institutional turn**

What is the legacy left by this long and articulated process of institutional critique? What does institutional critique mean in the present historical, political and cultural context? And most importantly, is it possible to establish a new, transversal idea of this concept, transcending the boundaries of the so-called field of art, while, at the same time, making use of its theoretical and practical realities to stimulate a broader understanding of the nuanced function of institutions in general? Both “waves” of institutional critique analysed in the previous section of this chapter are nowadays understood as “movements” in Art History, and integrated as such in art institutions as post-conceptual contemporary art practices, taking part to the discourse on the dematerialization of art (Sheikh, 2006). It can be argued, however, that these practices have laid the basis for a discourse on critique in the creative field, which is continuously evolving within and with society, thus continuously adjusting to reflect changing issues and priorities.

Many scholars have contended that we are currently witnessing the emergence of a third wave of institutional critique, which has developed due to the changing

circumstances in society. This new phase, as suggested by Raunig (2006), results from the convergence of the two preceding “generations”, but is founded on entirely distinct principles and premises. Engaging in transversal investigations that reach beyond the confines of art, in fact, this newly emerging discourse allows to transcend the boundaries of traditional artistic and academic disciplines, encouraging the connection of actors and resources associated with the art world with broader contexts, such as social movements and political associations (Holmes, 2007). On this regard, Holmes suggests that the result of these practices cannot “unambiguously be defined as art” (p. 58). In his essay “Towards New Political Creations: Movements, Institutions, New Militancy”, Raúl Sánchez Cedillo (2007) provides an explanation to this shift starting from some political events that have occurred in the last 30 years. In this study he uses the history of the progressive limitations imposed on the Global Justice and Solidarity Movement as an example. He believes that the limits put in place after 9/11 and the events surrounding the G8 in Genoa in 2001 marked a turning point for the democratic political space that the “movement of the movements” had been building since its foundation in 1999<sup>9</sup>. These events, according to the author, have contributed to the “closure of the political space”, and brought about as a consequence political impotence and organizational weakness. This theory is coherent with what Marina Gracés claims in her paper “To Embody Critique: Some Theses, Some Examples” (2006) where she also agrees on the idea that the reality we are living in is characterized by a shared and generalized state of impotence. To this regard, therefore, she argues that, while before critique was used as a response to ignorance, now it must be used to fight impotence.

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<sup>9</sup> The organization historically recognized as the global justice and solidarity movement (or “the movement of movements”) is a global coalition that was established at the end of the 1990s with the objective of promoting a just and equitable global order. Since its foundation, the movement has taken action in a number of fights aimed at solving global challenges, addressing issues such as human rights, environmental sustainability, and economic inequalities. One of the main protests brought forward by the took place during the G8 Summit of 2008 in Genova, Italy. During this event, thousands of demonstrators gathered to take action against the policies proposed by the G8 leaders, leading to the intervention of law-enforcement, which consequently escalated in violent clashes. In the aftermath of this event, the movement faced a number of challenges. In fact, in addition, the restrictive policies adopted by many governments in the same year as a consequence of the 9/11 terrorist attack, contributed to making it progressively harder for democratic groups to organize and protest.

Therefore, in this context, artists and intellectuals previously perceived as “heroes” designated to shed light on societal truths and values do not play this guiding role anymore. The author goes on sustaining that impotence has unfolded together with a number of social changes that have brought our society to be a “network society”. This concept implies that the inclusion or exclusion of people is not decided on the basis of pertinence with respect to a group, but instead depends on the individual capacity of connecting. She argues: “in the network-society, everyone is on their own in their connection to the world” (p. 204).

For all of these reasons, therefore, it can be said that a renewed phase of institutional critique has begun, which cannot focus on matters concerned exclusively with the art field anymore (as artists and art theorists have lost their role of “guidance”) but must keep exploiting the field as a means to go over its borders and engage in a broader scope, in order to overcome this state of impotence. According to Graces’ analysis, this objective can only be achieved if critique is *embodied* by those engaging in it. She underscores that embodying critique involves participating in a process that initially entails confronting one’s own “I”. Within this framework, the term “I” is not used to refer to subjectivity or individuality; rather, it signifies what detaches and connects individuals to the network society, causing them to experience a privatized existence that must be challenged. This confrontation is essential so as to experience the concept of “we”, thus allowing individuals to stop feeling “isolated in its connection to the network” and instead foster their sense of being part of and connected to the world. Thus, the privatization of existence, characteristic of a networked society centred around the concept of “I”, poses some challenges, as it isolates individuals from one another, making it increasingly difficult to identify common ground for discussing shared issues and ultimately organizing collective efforts. In the words of the author:

The experience that we have of the world refers us to a private field of references: individual or collective, it is always self-referential. This privatization of existence has two consequences: first, the depoliticizing of the social question. This means that we have enemies but we don’t know where our friends or allies are. We can perceive the foci of aggression against our lives, but not the line of demarcation between friend/enemy [...] how do we name the ‘we’ that suffers and struggles with these realities? By the same mechanism, the ‘enemy’ also



becomes privatized. Every person has their own enemy, in their own particular problem. The multiple fronts of struggle are difficult to share. [...] But the privatization of existence also has a second consequence: the radicalization of the social question, which sinks its roots directly in our own experience of the world and not someone else's. (p. 206)

Expanding on this idea, she further elaborates that to genuinely attain this sense of commonality and shared identity embodied by the notion of “we”, members of society must begin to experience the world starting from their own unique perspectives and, thus, from their individual field of possibilities. To embody critique therefore means to “drown oneself in their actual experience of the world” (p. 206).

This concept is also expressed by Negri and Hard (2009) in their analysis concerning the possibilities of identity politics. They argue that, in order to put in place a politics of revolution, social movements cannot abstain from engaging in a politics of identity. Nevertheless, when outlining the potential challenges associated with this type of thinking within the context of revolutionary thought, they contend that while it is essential for this discourse to originate from the concept of identity, it is equally crucial for it not to culminate solely in identity, but to possess the potential to transcend it. They explain that three main tasks must be performed “in order to keep the rebellious function of identity moving forward, and carry identity politics toward a revolutionary project” (p. 332).

The first task they refer to consists in recognizing the existence of identity – what Graces defined as one's own experience. In this way, identity is made visible and with it all the hierarchical structures governing relations in society are revealed. Secondly, identity politics must “proceed from indignation to rebellion against the structures of domination using the subordinated identity as a weapon in the quest for freedom” (p. 330). This implies that individuals must liberate themselves from the structures that have contributed to defining an oppressive idea of identity in the first place. This concept goes beyond the mere idea of emancipation. In this context, in fact, liberation isn't just about the freedom to express one's identity (i.e., who you really are) but also encompasses the creation of a new realm of possibilities, enabling self-determination and the exploration of transformative alternatives. It opens the door to the question, “What can one become?”.

Finally, the third task involves the self-abolition of identity. Revolutionary politics, as argued by the two authors, does not aim only at the improvement of conditions within the status quo social structure. Its purpose must in fact be expanded to attacking the structures and institutions that have created subordination of identities in the first place, thus setting in motion a process of social and institutional innovation. Negri and Hard additionally clarify that these three tasks are to be intended as equally important and inseparable. In order to achieve the final objective, in fact, all three of them must be performed simultaneously.

This view, besides providing a clear difference between practices engaging in revolutionary and non-revolutionary politics, also captures the main distinction between the first two phases of institutional critique and this third generation. Moreover, it underlines a new alternative view on the role of institutions: posing them in a renewed positive, imaginative and transformative position.

In the introduction to his text “Instincts and Institution”, Gilles Deleuze makes some considerations about this affirmative dimension of “generating” institutions, which he poses in contrast with their traditional reputation as normative structures (Cedillo, 2007). According to Deleuze (1953), in fact, an institution is essentially a “process of satisfaction”. With this definition he intends to explain that institutions are an artificial tool, elaborated by individuals through the creation of “original worlds” mediating between people’s “tendencies” and the external environment. Building upon the idea that individuals inherently possess needs that they seek to fulfil, in fact, Deleuze makes a distinction between “instincts”, i.e., the needs that can be directly satisfied thanks to the interaction with the external environment, and institutions. Instead, in situations where the immediate satisfaction of a need isn’t possible within the external context, individuals devise artificial superstructures serving as intermediaries and thus enabling them to fulfil their inclinations. However, the act of establishing these so-called “original worlds” brings about a transformation in the very nature of the tendency itself. In fact, in this way individuals are somehow freed from their nature, while however being subjected to new – institutional – structures.

Deleuze illustrates this perspective with a practical example for clarification. Starting from the fact that people have the tendency to eat, he argues that, while at times food can easily be found in the external environment, there are situations in

which it may not be accessible. In such cases, therefore, these individuals are compelled to create a new, original way to satisfy their hunger. The institution of money, in this case, is therefore artificially created with the scope of mediating between the need and the environment, and as a means to exchange goods and thus (as per this example) buy food. However, as already discussed above, the creation of a new system fundamentally alters the nature of the tendency. Following the example provided, therefore, once an economic system of exchange is introduced, people no longer solely possess a need for food, they also develop a need for money, as this becomes an alternative means to satisfy their hunger. Consequently, the creation of a new, original world provokes the shift from an instinct to an institution. In essence, this demonstrates how institutions are not a prerequisite of society, but are the means through which tendencies can be satisfied: “the indirect figuration” of human tendencies.

To delve deeper into this concept, Deleuze highlights the distinction between the notions of institution and that of law, putting forward a foundational critique of the contract. He actively critiques the perspective that regards institutions as outcomes of a contract entered into by members of society; a contract that guarantees the establishment and continuation of social structures, thus implying that societies endure as long as the contract is enforced. Regarding this viewpoint, the author critically observes that this perspective locates the “positive” outside the “social”, thus viewing society as founded on a negation, a constraint, an obligation. Deleuze takes a different stance, challenging this conventional perspective and offering a compelling alternative that transcends the traditional regulatory function of institutions, positioning them “in the positive”. In this way, he attributes to institutions a creative potential, portraying them as imaginative agents that facilitate processes of generation rather than limitation. From this idea some political considerations can be drawn. Deleuze elucidates that a system characterized by an abundance of laws and a scarcity of institutions equates to tyranny, where laws directly dictate people's conduct, resulting in a repressive regime.

On the contrary, a system featuring numerous foundational institutions – that assure individual behaviour – and only a few laws, represents a democracy. This perspective provides a complete redefinition of institutions, traditionally seen as something that constraints human nature. Moreover, positioning institutions in the

“positive” also paves the way for a new possible view of society, presented as a changing complex of conventions, and not as a combination of immutable and unchallengeable obligations and beliefs (Faldini, 2016).

Coherently, Rauning (2006), drawing from this theory, defines the concept of *instituent practices*. This term can be applied to all the movements aiming to oppose and subvert rigid institutional frameworks, thus presenting an opposition to the logics of institutionalization through the invention of new forms of instituting. In light of this, the so-called “instituent practices” stimulate both a new articulation of critique and, at the same time, a new understanding of the role and meaning of institutions, thus defining a new notion of what “instituting” is. Instituent practices must therefore be understood as a process, an alternative mode, which does not completely stand in opposition to the general idea of institutions, but that does “flee” from the idea of institutionalized and structuralized institutions, thus giving birth to new horizons and possibilities. In this sense, institutions must be placed in the positive and understood as creative entities capable of producing and proposing an alternative to the existing status quo.

The concept of “alter-institution”, which will be the main focus of the next chapter, has emerged from this theoretical context. It could be argued that it embodies the practical implication of these concepts and notions, providing a new perspective on institutional critique, which does not necessarily involve the complete denial of institutions as a general concept but, instead, offers the potential for instigating creative processes aimed at the construction of new meanings for institutions, both within and beyond the realm of art. In the next chapter, therefore, the analysis will first focus on explaining the theoretical and practical framework around the concept of alter-institutions, also through the discussion of some examples of existing realities that fall under this definition. The idea of alter-institutions will be presented taking an intersectional perspective, based on the concept of “marginality” primarily adopted by bell hooks in the realm of a “politics of location”.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **On alter-institutionality: history, development and new perspectives**

#### **2.1 From the white cube to alter-institutions**

In the contemporary world, cultural institutions are increasingly asked and expected to engage in matters that could be defined as urgent global political issues. The aim of this first part of the chapter is to explore this tendency, through an (art) historical overview of the role that art institutions – especially museums and galleries – have played in the last hundred years, in order to answer the following questions: why do people expect art institutions to address this kind of issues, thus performing a political role? And why is there a tendency within the realm of contemporary art production to engage in providing possible solutions and suggestions concerning how to react to contemporary challenges? Many arguments can be brought forward to explain the reasons behind this trend. First, it can be maintained that art itself as a means of communication has a number of characteristics that make it particularly effective for this purpose. It could be claimed, for example, that because art has the power to evoke emotions, thus resonating deeply with people on an emotional level, it may be more successful in communicating messages, making the audience more receptive to them and thus more prone to understand and address the challenges in question (Edelman, 1995). Additionally, as art should most often foster creativity and innovation, it may offer new perspectives and thus inspire individuals and communities to think creatively about these problems and develop innovative solutions. Another reason explaining why people expect art to engage in global political matters may be that it can communicate complex narratives in a way that is accessible and engaging to a wide audience, therefore facilitating exchange and understanding, helping to bridge divides and promote cooperation. Moreover, as major art institutions have a global reach, their exhibitions and collections attract visitors and attention from around the world, making them platforms for raising awareness and mobilizing support. Additionally, as they often collaborate with diverse stakeholders, they can take part and contribute to the promotion of interdisciplinary approaches to

addressing global issues. Finally, art institutions often have a long-term perspective, preserving cultural heritage and artistic traditions for future generations.

Despite successfully explaining why from the point of view of consumers art may be considered an effective means for the communication of political messages, the explanations above do not provide a valid response that considers such matter from the stand-point of art production and distribution. The attention must therefore be shifted to a more significant question: why should art institutions feel committed to take a stand and engage in these kinds of issues?

In “The Aesthetics of Resistance”, Peter Weiss (2005) reflects on this point, focusing specifically on the relationship between art and politics, and especially trying to provide an explanation around why art should exist within politics. He suggests that because objects carry meanings from the past, if exposed and related in new, alternative ways, they can be used to uncover historical patterns and narratives. Following this view, art institutions are perceived as capable of linking the past not only to the present but – potentially – also to the future, giving life to novel relationships that can foster the rethinking of art history and of history in general, thus allowing the establishment of new contemporary realities (Damgacioglu, 2021).

According to this perspective, then, culture plays a primary role as a means for visualizing alternatives. And, as a consequence, the scope of institutions is rethought: rather than thinking of them merely as storehouses, they are reimagined as intermediaries between past history and future possibilities, simultaneously allowing an understanding of today societies (Bishop, 2013). It can be said, therefore, that expecting these institutions to react and provide resolutions to pressing challenges reflects the acknowledgment of their potential to successfully impact these complex and intricate matters. Therefore, art institutions are conceived as active repositories of human creativity and culture, reflecting values, aspirations, and concerns of societies. In this way they thus have the capability of representing – and thus performing, if adopting a cultural studies perspective<sup>10</sup> – reality and contemporaneity.

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<sup>10</sup> In Cultural Studies, as an interdisciplinary field that was born in the late 1950s, representation is seen as a dynamic process through which meanings are produced, negotiated, and contested. Thus, one key concept is the idea that sees representation not merely as a reflection of reality but as something through which the latter is actively constructed and performed.

This approach to art production and distribution, however, must be considered and understood while keeping in mind its contrasting position with respect to the prominent ideology that has characterized the expected role and activities of art institutions for the majority of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Western countries: the so-called aesthetics of the “white cube”<sup>11</sup>. This “ideology” was introduced as a consequence of the process of sacralization of high culture and art explained by Paul DiMaggio (1982) in his publications about the establishment of an organizational model for the cultural world from a sociological standpoint, further discussed in the previous chapter. With the emergence of this view, starting from the early years of the 1900s a number of art scholars and critics began to engage in practices supporting the idea of a “neutrality of the arts”. Thus, it was at this point that the debate on the role of art institutions with respect to matters of political relevance emerged. The main argument sustained by this group of theorists (Greenberg, Barr) was that art, being considered as something completely detached from reality, must have been presented to the public in the most neutral way possible, not to influence their perception and experience of consumption. Therefore, the role of the institution in this context was that of a neutral container with the aim of exposing art for art’s sake and aesthetic appreciation, without influencing judgment or contextualizing objects as part of predefined narratives: art was “just art”. Galleries and museums, thus, had to be empty spaces, providing no description or indication, so that every individual in the audience could develop their own interpretation of the exhibited art pieces, in order to escape any potential ideological influence. The belief around this practice was that the artworks exhibited within institutional spaces had to be produced, exhibited and consumed on a plane completely

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<sup>11</sup> In the 1930s, New York’s Museum of Modern Art and its director, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., institutionalized the aesthetics of the “white cube”, representing the culmination of a long history of experimentation and debate around the topic. This new display method focused viewers’ attention on a selected number of masterpieces. In fact, the exhibition design presented art objects as self-sufficient symbols, detached from reality and expected to establish a personal and emotional connection with each individual in the public, thus abandoning the research of any global meaning and focusing instead on the aesthetic value of art as an independent subject and practice. For this reason, interpretive wall texts were minimized so to allow viewers to form their own subjective interpretations, leaving the artworks to act as symbols of their creators’ artistic genius.

detached from reality and therefore they could not be related to the contemporaneity of society.

Starting from the 1960s, with the development of the countercultural movement<sup>12</sup>, however, this ideology began to be criticized and a contrasting theory, arguing against the possibility for an institution to be neutral, emerged. The main claim brought about by this theoretical opposition was that “no position” still represents and implies locating oneself in favour of the status quo of things in society. As suggested by Jillian Steinhauer (2018) in support of this thesis, “neutrality is a fiction”. According to her view, in fact, as museums should represent a democratic space, they should be compelled to take a stance on contemporary issues and work in order to foster discussions in this sense. In fact, it is only through the acknowledgement and embracement of their political nature together with an effort of making public and transparent their internal decision-making processes, that a real space of democracy can be created. The starting point of this critical theory is the belief that, because art institutions have the responsibility to select and establish which objects will be collectively considered worthy of being exhibited and thus culturally relevant, they by definition represent a space of power. Consequently, it is considered unreasonable and counterproductive to sustain the idea of neutrality of exhibition spaces. Moreover, according to Clive Gray (2017) the selection process in museums represents an exercise of power as it predominantly functions as a performance that reinforces prevailing power structures within society. Moreover, he underlines that objects are always exhibited in a specific context, serving as components of a discursive narrative, however “neutral” it may be. Under these conditions, therefore, as the perspective adopted is also supported by concrete evidence – the objects on show – it

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<sup>12</sup> Starting from the early 1960s a majority of western countries have witnessed the emergence of a social and cultural movement that has later been defined as the “countercultural revolution”. This historical period was characterized by a rejection of mainstream values and a desire for social change, mainly brought about by younger generations in many different aspects of life. Various interconnected factors contributed to the rise of a so-called counterculture, both from a cultural and historical viewpoint. Some of the most influential phenomena include the rise of civil rights movements against racial segregation, the strengthening of the feminist movement, and the acts of protests against the Vietnam War. The countercultural revolution that emerged as a consequence of these events has had a deep impact on societal norms, influencing subsequent generations and contributing to ongoing social and cultural changes.



may easily happen that the subjective narrative brought forward is instead disguised as a representation of objective truths. In this theoretical framework, it is furthermore emphasized how art institutions, as structured organizations, are founded on political relationships and power hierarchies. This can be applied to the internal relations between the people taking action within the institution as well as extended to their interactions with various external entities. Consequently, these institutions are inherently intertwined with political dynamics and power balances. As a result, they may find themselves compelled to perform political decisions well in advance of the actual presentation of art objects to the public. Concerning this matter, Steinhauer (2018) argues that the present museums are to be considered the result of the politics of a small elite of people: largely white and wealthy, inextricable from the ideology of colonialism, which placed Western society at the centre of cultural production through the exploitation of other lands, peoples and cultures. This point also sheds light on the fact that hegemonic ideologies are carried on by art exhibitions not only through selecting which objects get to be exhibited within museums, but also through deciding *how* they are being exhibited. In this regard, Steinhauer highlights how, often, objects from “non-Western” cultures are displayed in museums as historical or ethnographic findings, rather than as works of art.

An example of this practice is represented in the documentary “Statues Also Die” (1953), a French essayistic short film, massively censored, directed by Alain Resnais, Chris Marker, and Ghislain Cloquet, about historical African art and the effects colonialism has had on how it is perceived. The movie stresses how the existent colonial ideology in art institutions has led to compelling African art to lose much of its idiosyncratic expression, with the aim of making it appealing specifically to the gaze of Western consumers. Within the narrative carried out by the film, statues are declared to be dead (or maybe, killed?) as they have been completely deprived of their original meaning, as well as removed from the context that gave them life. As stated by Clive Gray it can be said that “In this respect museums are the sites within which ideologies are displayed just as much as they are sites where collections of artefacts are displayed” (p. 17).



Figure 4: « *Les statues meurent aussi* ». 1953. France. Directed by Chris Marker, Alain Resnais, and Ghislain Cloquet. French; English subtitles. 30 min. Courtesy Présence Africaine Editions.

For all of the reasons reported above, in her essay “For Slow Institutions” Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez (2017) argues that supporting the idea that art institutions have been built out of or should act within the neutrality of the white cube (and its Western colonial legacy), has the sociopolitical implication of perpetuating a partial and incomplete narrative of history that does not consider or take responsibility for the role art institutions have played in the perpetuation of systemic inequalities and oppressions in society. Additionally, it implies the denial of any movement forward as it blocks the possibility of any critical analysis or self-questioning process.

One of the first and most compelling critiques of the underlying ideological principles of the white cube, however, can be found in Brian O'Doherty's series of essays published in 1986 under the title “Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space”. O'Doherty's perspective emerges from the context of Post-Minimalism and Conceptual Art of the late 1960s. His argument posits that the gallery space is not a neutral container, but rather a product of historical construction. The white cube, in his view, acts as a partition allowing the separation of social and political

meanings from the intrinsic value of art. He argues that “the white wall's apparent neutrality is an illusion. It stands for a community with common ideas and assumptions” (p.79). The cultural institutional space is thus considered far from being free of ideology, while on the contrary being perceived as something designed to promote the idea of freedom in the arts as a way to support the democratic values proper of a capitalist, “American dream” society (Petrešin-Bachelez, 2017).

The debate that has emerged around the white cube ideology, also supported by the practices of institutional critique that have been analysed in the previous chapter of this thesis, has fostered the emergence of a divide fundamentally concerning the role of institutional art spaces within societies. On one side are those supporting the idea that culture should be produced and consumed as a separated subject, independent from political consideration. Conversely, on the other side are those claiming the impossibility for these actors to maintain neutrality, arguing that refraining from explicitly taking a stance is, in fact, a form of aligning with the existing status quo. Drawing on the theory developed by this latter group of scholars, and thus assuming that museums are influential agents in shaping public discourse, it is reasonable to recognize their role not only as repositories of cultural heritage and historical artifacts, but instead as dynamic institutions occupying a pivotal space in the intersection of politics and culture. As a consequence, after a long process of depoliticization – corresponding to the emergence of the white cube ideology based on art neutrality – the art world is currently experiencing a renewed demand for clear positioning, with an increasing expectation for art institutions to articulate their stance on global issues and challenges or, at the very least, to provide a platform for contemplation and discussion surrounding these significant topics. This “politicization” of the cultural world has its roots in the countercultural revolutionary movements of the 1960s. Since that period, subsequent historical and social developments have intensified the need to question established social rules and conventions. The emergence of a postcolonial thought – evolving from the long historical process of decolonization – coincided with the emergence of a globalized society and economy, leading to new production and consumption patterns. This transformative landscape underscored the impossibility of conceiving fixed and linear definitions of culture, thus shedding light on the hegemonic nature of ideologies.

Consequently, a renewed sensitivity brought about the necessity for influential institutions in society to explore and reveal their positionality. On this point, Petrešin-Bachelez argues that, despite “the spectre of the neutral white cube still haunts many architectural visions, museum directorships, and newly built art institutions” (p. 9), in recent decades, there has been an important shift. Peter Vergo (1989) has referred to this process as the advent of a “new museology”: a new approach to museum practices that started to take place at the end of the 1980s. Within this framework, museums are viewed as dynamic and evolving institutions (Spalding, 2002), constantly subject to transformation and regularly re-examining their objectives. Moreover, the emergence of a “new museology” – also indicating a shift in museums’ priorities – reflects a redirection of focus regarding what is considered central for these institutions (Watson, 2007). In fact, if before art institutions were mostly evaluated according to their possessions (i.e., permanent collection value, endowments, staff and facilities), now greater awareness is posited on their social and political role and on their capacity to provide meaningful benefits to the external community they seek to serve (Weil, 1999).

Thus, it can be said that the contemporary panorama of cultural institutions is the result of the ongoing debate between what remains of the traditional view of the white cube and a more recent push for political participation. Being caught between these two opposing forces: the pressure to be politically engaged in social issues on one side, and the “risks” – both financial and in terms of reputation – that taking position inevitably entails on the other, these institutions often fail their purpose of opening new paths of reflection and dialogue on contemporary problems, only partially and superficially addressing these matters. Using the words of Marco Baravalle (2022): “they welcome only those radical forms of expression that do not challenge their institutional structure or economic and financial underpinnings” (p. 298). In this context, however, the lack of self-questioning leads to a *stasis* from which alternatives fail to emerge. The risk is that art institutions find themselves confined to a role primarily centred on conservation rather than on the promotion and production of innovation. In “Inside the white cube”, O’Doherty comments:

What keeps it stable is the lack of alternatives, a rich constellation of projects  
comments on matters of location, not so much suggesting alternatives as

enlisting the gallery space as a unit of aesthetic discourse. Genuine alternatives cannot come from within this space. (p.80)

A noticeable symptom of this tendency is that the institutions' involvement in global political matters has been predominantly manifested throughout the display of politicized artworks, thus focusing on content, rather than by adopting political stands on their constitutive and organizational structures and functions. This observation somehow suggests the existence of incentives that contribute to the perpetuation of the status quo. This may explain the resulting superficial engagement with these themes that fails to truly challenge the hierarchical structures at the core of the issue. A concrete example that is worth mentioning is provided by Baravalle within his comment regarding the 2022 Venice Art Biennale. In the article "The Milk of Dreams, or The Lukewarm Cup That Puts Commons to Sleep", he argues:

This exhibition is exemplary of the ideological function of the liberal democracy art industry today, a function of co-optation that mobilises posthumanism, theories of the compost, new-materialisms, and the decolonial – sometimes opportunistically, sometimes superficially, always for the aim of promoting them to the status of a new cultural logic of neoliberalism. (p 327)

Baravalle's observation on this trend prompts a reflection on how, despite contemporary curatorial projects frequently draw inspiration from and make reference to radical political theories, they however fail to integrate these discourses into a broader discussion around the structural and organizational characteristics of the institution itself. To further prove his point, the author goes on reporting and critically commenting on a statement by the writer and curator Laura Raicovich (2022), where she claims that the exhibition was successful and innovative in that it had engaged mostly women and non-binary artists who brought about discourses on transformation and identity beyond the anthropocentric domain. She further states that the result obtained by the Biennale was the creation of interconnected networks of solidarity fostering the production of alternative forms of knowledge. However, Baravalle's critical analysis emphasizes that the original force and radical significance of the referenced theories was neutralized and depoliticized by the context within which they were presented: structurally as far as it could be from embracing and acting according

to such ideologies. Artworks are thus exploited as mere “content” in a context that however stays the same and fails to activate them in their original, radical meaning, thus acting, on the contrary, as a depoliticizing machine.

Starting from this point, the concept and theory of “alter-institutionality” can be introduced. This paradigm shift regarding the conception of art institutions in connection to society and politics reflects an effort to fundamentally alter the perspective on their inherent role with the aim of opening new horizons of possibilities within the institutional art space. This theoretical framework lays its foundations on and draws inspiration from the theories of the Greek-French philosopher, economist, and psychoanalyst Cornelius Castoriadis regarding the primary and constitutive roles of institutions. According to Castoriadis (1975) every society, in fact, *self-institutes*, meaning that every society naturally creates its own institutions. In this theoretical context, institutions are thought to be based upon so-called “imaginary significations”, defined as artificially created meanings used to orient values and activities of the members of a society. Moreover, the author claims that societies are constantly subject to self-initiated and self-provoked processes of change. And it is precisely this characteristic of constant temporality that defines societies and their institutions, which can thus only be understood in their perpetual state of possibly being something *alternative*. In Castoriadis’ words:

Each society also brings into being its own mode of self-alteration, which can also be called its temporality – that is to say, it also brings itself into being as a mode of being. History is ontological genesis not as the production of different tokens of the essence of society but as the creation, in and through each society, of another type (form-figure-aspect-sense: *eidos*) of being society which is in the same stroke the creation of new types of social-historical entities (objects, individuals, ideas, institutions, etc.) on air levels and on levels which are themselves posited-created by a given society. Even as instituted, society can exist only as perpetual self-alteration. For it can be instituted only as the institution of a world of significations, which exclude self-identity and exist only through their essential possibility of being-other. (p. 372)

The process of transformation or *alteration* of a society, therefore, is to be attributed to the original scope and form of being of the society itself. Its evolution, however, must be conceived as the creation of a completely novel way of being society; what is defined as a new *eidos*, a Greek word meaning “form” or “appearance”, that Castoriadis uses to convey the message that, despite the change takes place “in and through society”, the result is a completely original dynamic society, standing on new (and temporary) criteria and beliefs.

Institutions within this framework thus act, change and exist through the *imaginary*, which is the process of “creation ex nihilo” (p.3). In this regard, Castoriadis underlines that the imagination of potential alternatives does not simply originate from the reflection and imitation of something already existing, but rather consists in the unceasing and undetermined creation of novel possible realities. Managing to overcome the conventional perspective around institutionality, this theory introduces a new definition which effectively incorporates what must be understood as the central meaning and primary role of so-called “alter-institutions”: the ability to imagine and realize new possibilities. Building upon this theory, Negri and Hardt make a significant contribution to the subject. In the sixth chapter of their book “Commonwealth” (2009) they focus their analysis on the concept of revolution, proposing a theory asserting that the existence of institutional will and institutions themselves is a vital factor in catalysing processes of insurrection and revolution – that is, processes of change. They furthermore state that “Revolution is insurrection once it has become an institutional process, [...] which we would call a common” (p. 360). In this perspective, the institution's role is to facilitate the transcendence of the destructive phase of insurrection and nurture a sustained, long-term process of transformation. This process aims at the formation of a new humanity, progressing beyond emancipation and ultimately achieving liberation.

Having elucidated the theoretical rationale behind the argument of this analysis, it becomes crucial to establish the connections between the institutional framework and the arts. This is essential to offer an insight into the reasons behind the decision to concentrate on institutionality – and in particular alter-institutionality – within the cultural sector. Drawing from Deleuze’s theory, it can be asserted that art production plays a pivotal role in the process of creation of alter-institutions. For this reason,

therefore, it is logical to examine cultural institutions as catalysts for this transformative shift, that Deleuze (1977) defines as a process of “becoming minor institutions”. In this context, the arts are indeed recognized as possessing a dual characteristic, which, despite appearing to be in contrast, is precisely what actually enables them to adapt and effectively fulfil this role. While being formally structured and organized as proper institutions, in fact, they simultaneously wield the power of *fabulation*, consisting in the ability to create new ways of thinking and perceiving the world. Art is in fact seen as a process of becoming, where on the one hand traditional structures can be escaped and new ideas and connections can be explored, and, on the other, where this power can be redirected towards their own institutional architectures, thus managing to create new instituted and institutional realities. This process defined as of “becoming a minor institution” describes what this thesis refers to as the alter-institutional turn (Baravalle, 2018).

According to Baravalle, alter-institutional practices can be characterized as processes that induce a deterritorialization within established art institutions. This entails urging museums to transcend their traditional roles of conserving and valorising “national treasures”. Instead, these practices compel these institutions to reimagine themselves as arenas in which critical social discourses are fostered, and the cultivation of different forms of life is promoted. This is intended in reference to Rancière (2000) definition of: “aesthetic acts as configurations of experience that create new modes of sense perception and induce novel forms of political subjectivity”. In this sense, therefore, art institutions are seen as instituent practices capable of effectively expressing their imaginative power not only within the confines of the art world but also outside of it, thus transcending the notion of “self-sufficiency” and rather embracing the idea of being an instrument for the generation of alternative possibilities. Seen in this light, the construction of alter-institutions must serve as a means to structurally empower distinct “art worlds” by establishing new infrastructures. To enter the realm of alter institutions thus means “to move the accent from showing to inhabiting: allowing a new space-time dimension for projects that want to engage with the context and that too often result in paternalistic and unattended social consulting” (Baravalle, 2018, p. 11). Institutions must therefore “embody critique” (Garcés, 2006), rather than merely focus on showcasing critical artworks.



The institution itself must be perceived not only as the structural means through which the solution is achieved, but also as the ultimate end of the transformative process. It becomes the subject under scrutiny, placed at the centre of the transformation. In this sense, then, so-called “instituent practices” can be understood as creators of spaces where the aesthetic and political dimensions act as interrelated and co-instituted forces in an ongoing motion of material experimentation (Caleo, 2021). The reappropriation of art institutions, conceived and executed in continuity with artistic practices, thus facilitates a redesign that extends beyond material conditions, encompassing the transformation of relational dynamics, productive systems, and multiple economies, enabling continuous shifts of scale – from the personal to the political, from singularities to what can be termed as *transindividuality*. This concept means to challenge a reductionist view of individuals as isolated entities and instead promotes an understanding of human existence and social relations that goes beyond individuality, emphasizing the interconnectedness and interdependence of individuals within a society. In this manner, art reconfigures itself as a space of radical imagination, capable of rethinking the status of both artistic and non-artistic institutions, as well as the nature of the creative process itself (p. 131).

Examining alter-institutions acting within the cultural sector from a practical standpoint, it is necessary to make a distinction and categorize them into two diverse types: governmental and autonomous ones (Baravalle, 2021). The former are created as part of the official art system. These practices are often conceived and exhibited as artistic objects, thus sharing with these many characteristics, such as individual authorship. They fall under the definition of “alter-institutions” as they aim to create spaces fostering critical reflection and dialogue upon social issues, often critically questioning the role of art and art institutions within society. Such alter-institutional practices take place at the boundaries of the art world, always trying to overcome its limits and experiment with new perspectives. However, it is necessary to stress some existing limitations to their capability of “becoming minor” (Deleuze, 1977). Being intrinsically dependent on the institutions that sustain them, they rarely evolve in real collective autonomous actors capable of rethinking themselves and transforming their structure and organization models in a democratic and radical way.

On the contrary, the second type of alter-institutions – autonomous cultural alter-institutions – emerge from collective processes, with the main aim of using art as a means for engaging in social issues both inside and outside the boundaries of the art world, in order to radically change social relationships. There are diverse main characteristics that differentiate them from governmental ones. First, they are financially and structurally autonomous with respect to other institutions. Secondly, they are to be conceived as democratic collective subjects by definition, as they are not the result of the project of a single author. Instead, they emerge from continuous processes of transformation brought forward by collective subjects. Moreover, they can be characterized by the fact that they tend to stabilize in a determined spatial context. This tendency of root-taking must not be intended as an inclination to localism, but instead as a radical choice against the obliged rootlessness and continuous movement characterizing the neoliberal conception of space-time circulation of art (dependent on big international art events and festivals).

While there are no predefined guidelines for establishing an autonomous alter-institution, there is however a shared need to identify the field of forces and act to creatively question the present and imagine radical political alternatives. For example, according to Baravalle (2021), the position of these actors with respect to official institutions can change over time. He in fact highlights that it should be feasible for them to alternate moments of resistance with attempts of cooperation, provided that doing so does not endanger their autonomy. Despite the differences discussed above, both the organizational models presented here can effectively take action to promote a new, alternative approach to cultural institutionality. On the one hand, it may be easier for autonomous alter-institutions to engage in more radical practices. Being independent and thus less subjected to constraints by external pressures, they may act more effectively around very specific topics and concerns. On the other, for governmental alter-institutions to really commit to radical actions would entail a long process of deconstruction of the institutional framework in which they are embedded and that has characterized them thus far. It is only by negating these positions that a truly radical process of revision can unfold, paving the way for the creation of a space adapt to the emergence of potential alternative perspectives. However, this latter group, having a larger capacity of action as opposed to the first one considered, possesses the

ability to wield more influence, and thus make a more substantial impact in fostering revision and discussion.

Drawing from these theoretical premises, the next part of this chapter will explore and delineate a novel perspective on alter-institutionality, starting from an analysis of bell hooks' concept of "margin" and marginality". The aim is to open new views on the potentialities of alter-institutions in relation to their role in contemporary societies.

## **2.2 Acting from the margin**

This part of the chapter aims to apply bell hooks' theory on marginality to the subject of alter-institutionality within the realm of arts and cultural production, with the purpose of providing a new perspective on the subject: i.e., considering alter-institutions as institutions acting from the "margin". In order to achieve this objective, this next section focuses on exploring the contact points between the two theories, through an analysis of the main foundational features of bell hooks' thought, that constitute and explain her view and conceptualization of marginality.

bell hooks, pseudonym of Gloria Jean Watkins, was an American author, theorist, professor, and social critic born in Hopkinsville, Kentucky in 1952. During that time, in most Southern States in the US segregation laws were still valid. Segregation consisted in the legally and socially enforced physical separation of African Americans and other non-white ethnic minorities from whites. Being a black poor woman in those years, bell hooks had to experience the intersection of various discriminations (race, gender, class). This led her to focus on investigating the connections between various systems of oppression, and to develop an oppositional theory aimed at shedding light on their shared common roots and rules of action, uncovering how they are all manifestations of a singular, pervasive strategy of abuse and domination (Nadotti, 1989). Drawing attention to those shared sensitivities which transcend the boundaries of class, gender, race, age, ability and other potential differences, hooks intended to constitute a fertile ground to serve as a foundation for building bonds that could form the basis for solidarity and coalition, aspiring toward the development of a critical voice. In order to achieve this objective, she considers it necessary to firstly overcome the dualism between one's own private experience and

the sense of collective identity. Therefore, through the affirmation and acknowledgment of the plurality of identities and diverse experiences, it becomes possible to prevent the reduction of subjectivity to a one-dimensional reality, without however losing sight of the existence of a shared consciousness of struggle. This entails an effort to fight for acquiring a radical subjectivity, which must start from the research of oppositional and liberatory ways of building identity (hooks, 1990). Moreover, she expresses the need to break “disciplinary cages” by overcoming the distinction between high and low brow culture, allowing thus the union of theoretical discourse and political practice. Her aim, in this regard, is to broaden the audience in order to promote education and bring people closer to the development of a critical thought around these discussions. She in fact believes that cultural institutions and “intellectuals” can themselves be perpetrators of discriminations if they fail in engaging with the oppressed groups of society. In order to break this pattern, it becomes thus necessary to make room for oppositional practices that no longer require intellectuals to be confined within narrow separate spheres with no connection to the everyday world. She advocates for the emergence of a new approach to culture, pushed by the desire of connecting intellectual work with the modes of being, forms of artistic expression, and aesthetics that can impact the everyday lives of both scholars on the one hand, as well as the masses on the other. She recognizes the potentialities of entering into a critical dialogue with those “who have neither culture nor means” to raise issues of aesthetics, or talk about what they see, think or hear, with the aim of creating a space for critical exchange: a space where “highbrow” art reflects on and engages with popular culture. This represents one way in which hooks’ thought aligns with the criteria that characterizes the process of creation and definition of alter-institutions which, as maintained by Lütticken (2015), entails “creating ‘relational work/life models that insist on other ways of doing culture’”. These activities most often include “artists, intellectuals and activists as well as groups that art institutions rarely consider ‘target audiences’, such as cleaners or refugees” (p.8). hooks in fact argues that it is precisely in this space of mutuality that a true future site of resistance can be funded; a meeting place where new radical things can happen. She therefore views cultural production as serving multiple purposes. First, she acknowledges its pedagogical and educational role, which is also strongly emphasized in the context of

alter-institutional practices through the implementation of various alternative projects, such as workshops, lectures and open conversations (Lütticken, 2015). Additionally, adopting a viewpoint inherent to the theoretical framework of cultural studies, she recognizes its capacity of creating new worlds through representation. In this context, she provides the example of how various choices in the use of language can shape different realities. Language is indeed described as a “place of struggle” (1990, Chapter 15). In fact, in her view, the selection of which language to use to address a certain topic can significantly impact the message conveyed. For instance, hooks reflects on how discourses about domination are traditionally carried out using a high register, what she refers to as a “public language”, proper of the dominant educated white part of society. This, therefore, contributes to the creation of a narrative which exclusively represents one singular point of view, and thus risks to reinforce existing power hierarchies and discriminations.

On this concern, the author describes her personal struggle to integrate black vernacular speech, her “private language” used within her family, into her academic and public discourse. This highlights that language is not merely a tool for shaping external reality and potentially altering societal power structures, but is also a means through which one can define and acknowledge their self-identity. Therefore, the assertion that “language is also a place of struggle” implies that it serves as a battleground where individuals navigate, expressing resistance through the words they choose and thus actively shaping their presence in the social and cultural landscape. In this way, therefore, she acknowledges the power of cultural production in representing – and thus shaping – potentially different realities.

In order to provide a more specific example concerning the potentialities of cultural production in general, the author narrows her focus to examine how art expression has historically been promoted within – marginal – black communities in the segregated states of the South (1990, Chapter 11). This case is useful as it reveals new horizons of possibilities. In that context, she explains, “art was seen as intrinsically serving a political function” (p. 105), and this was the case for multiple reasons. Firstly, as the production of artworks was considered a powerful means to counter the racist notion that portrayed black individuals as uncivilized and incapable of participating in intellectual pursuits, including the arts. Moreover, cultural

production and artistic expression served as avenues for displaced African people to establish an aesthetic legacy enabling them to maintain a connection with their history and cultural past. Finally, art was seen as a way of escaping reality, helping poor black people in their struggle against racism by bringing pleasure and beauty into lives that were mostly characterized by oppression and material deprivation. According to hooks, however, the process of institutionalization of black art that took place with the establishment of the Black Arts Movement<sup>13</sup>, starting from the 1960s, did not result in the creation of a true alternative to the already existing standards that characterized the institutional (white) art world. While acknowledging certain accomplishments attributed to the movement's actions, in fact, the author also offers a critical perspective on its limitations. Firstly, she recognizes the pivotal role played by the movement in shaping strategies for decolonization within the cultural realm. Insisting that all art is political, in fact, she believes the movement has successfully encouraged black thinkers to start questioning the meaning and purposes of black artistic production while also fostering a reflection around the role that aesthetics could play within this discourse. However, her analysis also delves into the issues associated with the ideology promoted by the movement. She argues: “The black aesthetic movement was fundamentally essentialist. Characterized by an inversion of the ‘us’ and ‘them’ dichotomy, it inverted conventional ways of thinking about otherness in ways that suggested that everything black was good and everything white bad” (p. 107), rather than promoting diversity in artistic expression. Moreover, even if the purpose of the movement was to break away from the dominant white Western tradition in the arts, it inadvertently ended up promoting some theories that were rooted in that same thought. For instance, it endorsed the notion that cultural production for the masses could not be complex, perpetuating the idea that realism was more accessible, less classist and more direct compared to abstract art, and thus more suitable to convey political messages. This resulted in a homogenization of all cultural production accepted by the

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<sup>13</sup> The Black Arts Movement was formally founded in 1965 in Harlem by the poet Amiri Baraka with the establishment of the Black Arts Repertory Theater. The movement included artists focusing on music, literature, drama, and visual arts production. The purpose was to promote and support art expressions that could contribute to the political fight for black people's liberation. Thus, to develop a new alternative black aesthetics and especially to formalize the idea of art as a means to promote and inspire resistance against oppression.

movement, neglecting the recognition of diverse black experiences and thus ignoring the complexity of blackness. The argument advanced in the paper takes a critical stance, proposing that an African-American discourse on aesthetics, in order to represent a new horizon of possibilities, should not conform to or advocate for arguments in line with the traditional white Western thought. At the same time, however, it must not outrightly dismiss aspects of this view merely because they appear to maintain some connection with the colonizing culture. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize that while white Western culture has been the one starting point from which discussions on aesthetics have emerged so far, it is not the sole possibility, but one among many (Taylor, 1988). Consequently, bell hooks underscores the importance of exploring new locations and spaces of openness, where the concept of “anti-aesthetics” (Foster, 1983) can emerge from entirely different assumptions and unexplored categories. This radical perspective, urging the identification of new spaces serving as a starting point for initiating a process of revision (hooks, 1989), consists in the recognition and validation of what bell hooks defines as the space of the “margin”.

This thesis, therefore, provides further support for the idea that, in order to explore new potentialities within and beyond the boundaries of the cultural realm, art production must not take action from what is already established, in an attempt to revolutionize it. On the contrary, they must transform themselves and reposition through an imaginative process “ex nihilo” (Castoriadis), enabling them to proactively forge new *alternative* possibilities. To actively contribute to the advancement of “counter-hegemonic cultural practices,” it thus becomes crucial to adopt a politics of positionality.

Growing up in a small city in Kentucky in the 50s and 60s, where the black community was segregated, hooks had to undergo being physically marginalized. Drawing from her life experience, she develops a theory where marginality must be conceived not only as a concrete physical condition but also as an abstract concept. In the preface to the book “Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center” (1984), she writes:

The railroad tracks were a daily reminder of our marginality. Across those tracks were paved streets, stores we could not enter, restaurants we could not eat in, and people we could not look directly in the face. Across those tracks was a world we could work in as maids, janitors, as prostitutes, as long as it was in a service

capacity. We could enter that world but we could not live there. We had always to return to the margin, to cross the tracks, to shacks and abandoned houses on the edge of town. There were laws to ensure our return. (p. ix)

In this context she thus argues that choosing to position oneself in the margin, i.e., being “part of the whole but outside the main body”, provides an alternative, oppositional – yet more complete – perspective on society. On this concern, it is essential to emphasize the fundamental distinction between a condition of marginality super-imposed by oppressive power structures (exemplified by the segregation laws) and, on the contrary, marginality as the outcome of a deliberate political choice of positioning. Therefore, according to this view, marginality must be identified not as a site of deprivation, but rather as a site of radical possibility – a space of resistance. This perspective enabling a dual view – both from the outside in and from the inside out – makes it the ideal location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse. Being situated outside the present status quo, in fact, it offers the potential for radical perspectives from which to observe, create, imagine alternatives, and envision new worlds. On the contrary, the perspective that can be cultivated from the “centre”, is inherently partial. Unlike those at the margin, people living in the centre – intending it as both a metaphorical and physical space – may never feel compelled to venture beyond it and consequently might lack an awareness of what exists outside of it. Centrality, in this sense, is theorized as a limiting standpoint, where alternatives cannot be contemplated because the current situation is always perceived as natural, and thus remains unquestioned. Consequently, centrality operates as a transparent condition for those at the centre. They do not realize their position as they can afford to remain unaware of other existing positionalities.

This resonates with what Donna Haraway has defined as “situated knowledge”, which has greatly contributed to the scholarship on feminist standpoint theory. This concept, as articulated by Haraway in her essay “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective” (1988) emphasizes the idea that knowledge can never be objective but is always situated within specific contexts, perspectives, and social locations. Encouraging the acknowledgement of the situated nature of knowledge, the author highlights the importance of recognizing one’s own positionality in society as well as the many power dynamics at play in the



production and reproduction of knowledge. Therefore, by challenging the idea of a universal, objective truth, she calls for an appreciation of diverse perspectives and experiences.

Of course, people at the margin also own and perform a situated knowledge, shaped by their identity and life experience. However, their vision is comprehensive as it is built in continuous comparison with the centre. In fact, because the existing hierarchies of power and systems of oppression are constantly reminding them of their condition of marginality, they can never be unaware of their position. Therefore, marginality is never transparent; it is always visible and present to those at the margin. For these reasons, bell hooks defines the margin as a place where it is possible to develop an oppositional look. It is a space of resistance where practices of re-examination and deconstruction are continuously stimulated.

In this sense, the actors that fall within the description of autonomous alter-institutions provided above can be thought as marginal entities in that they are able to act outside of the centrality of the official institutional space, while still being in contact with it. They therefore occupy a marginal standpoint, allowing them to see simultaneously “from inside out and from outside in”, thus inspiring an oppositional view.

Numerous examples can be cited of cultural productions that, in their effort to connect with the margin, have not moved toward it but rather attempted the opposite – bringing the margin to the centre. In this regard, it is important to stress that actions carried out from central spaces are rarely radical or oppositional. On the contrary, these strategies are often employed to maintain the status quo, aiming to enlarge the metaphorical central space and make it more inclusive without however challenging its underlying dynamics. In her book “Writing beyond race” (2013), hooks addresses this tendency expressing that “the addition of difference does not alter the construction of the centre” (p. 27). This dynamic is exemplified by the struggles that unfolded in the initial phases of the feminist movements; wherein privileged white women sought equality with men of their same class. This illustrates a tendency to focus on achieving parity within existing power structures rather than challenging the broader systems of oppression. In fact, they advocated for a shift from a marginal to a central position, without however questioning the underlying power structures that had initially created

the dichotomy of margin and centre. Furthermore, they often neglected other concurrent struggles, failing to present opposing views on capitalism, classism, or racism. While, on the contrary, at times supporting or even exploiting them in the pursuit of centrality. Adopting a marginal perspective, on the other hand, entails resisting hegemonic dominance in all its diverse forms. It involves persistently engaging in resistance practices that are continuously evolving in that they are perpetually exposed to processes of criticism, questioning and re-examination. This approach promotes an intersectional view focusing on the connections and shared structures at the basis of different forms of oppressions. According to hooks, “all forms of oppression are linked in our society because they are supported by similar institutional and social structures, one system cannot be eradicated while others remain intact” (1984, p. 35).

To further clarify this concept, she uses as an example the controversial figure of Madonna, celebrated by some as a trailblazer who challenged traditional societal norms and expectations around the role of women and their sexuality and asserted her independence in a male-dominated industry. Exploring the artist’s reputation as an icon of female empowerment promoting themes of self-expression, independence, and confidence in her songs, hooks opens a discussion around her take on feminist ideals. Ultimately, she highlights how her struggles had remained superficial and still embedded in very traditional power hierarchies defined by white suprematism, capitalism and patriarchy (hooks, 2015). Furthermore, hooks critically analyses Madonna’s relationship with black culture. The singer’s statement about wanting to have black skin as a child exposes her privileged position which allows her, as a white woman, to separate the aesthetic of blackness from its social connotation with oppression and discrimination. Her position of centrality is thus rendered transparent to her by her privilege. Therefore, in many of her artistic productions, Madonna ends up colonizing black culture by appropriating some of its elements as an outsider.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> In order to better explain this concept, it is important to stress the difference between the concept of cultural appropriation one hand and reappropriation on the other. Acts of cultural appropriation involve power imbalances, where members of a dominant group inappropriately borrow elements from another marginalized minority, stripping them of their original meaning, and thus leading to the perpetuation of stereotypes. Reappropriation, instead, involves reclaiming the use of elements of one's own culture in a way that reaffirms its

Despite trying to present these choices as progressive and inclusive, she ultimately contributes to the perpetuation of the existing discriminatory status quo. At the conclusion of the chapter, then, hooks reflects on the artist's possibilities of stimulating the emergence of a politics of liberation and transgression, potentially in connection with black oppositional culture. She argues that this could in fact occur if only Madonna chose to shift her point of view and concentrate the narrative on her childhood experience as a white poor woman in a working-class family. Exploring the politics of exploitation, domination, and subjugation from within, shifting her perspective from the centre to the margin, could, according to hooks, give rise to different cultural productions and genuinely transgressive works. These could be perceived as acts of resistance that have the capacity to effectively transform societal norms.

Drawing from this example, a parallelism could be made with the previously mentioned Art Biennale 2022. In fact, also in that context there was an attempt to create an inclusive space and to advocate for diversity by incorporating individuals in representation of "marginal" minorities in the artistic production program. However, this was done without recognizing the structural centrality of the institutional framework in which these discourses were presented. Not only, thus, the central positionality of the space was not critically analysed, but it was not even acknowledged. Consequently, the two examples discussed prove that to take action and incorporate political discussions on the possibility of creating new realities within the realm of contemporary art production, these efforts must come from the margin. In this context, marginality should be understood in dual dimensions—both material and symbolic—established in contrast to centrality. In the first case, thus, the concept refers to the space occupied by the actors considered within society. For instance, in the case of art institutions, the marginal space is occupied by those taking action from outside of the official institutional centre – i.e., alter-institutions. On the other hand, symbolically, it involves adopting a marginal perspective characterized by conscious, self-critical, and inclusive thinking.

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significance and challenges misappropriation. It is a conscious act of agency, empowerment and celebration of cultural pride.

Drawing from Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" (1968), hooks claims that in order to initiate such process of reconstruction, it is first pivotal to understand the mechanisms at play in the perpetuation of the domination logic in society and, consequently, to develop potential strategies that could be employed for resistance and to foster a process of transformation. Therefore, firstly, in order to transcend dominator thinking, it is essential to overcome the dualistic notion that presupposes a constant division between a dominant and a dominated part, framing all relations in the dichotomy of victim and victimizer. Moving past this binary thinking, however, requires a shift from a politics of blame to a politics of accountability, as, according to hooks (2013),

Accountability is a more expansive concept because it opens a field of possibility wherein we are all compelled to move beyond blame to see where our responsibility lies. [...] If I only lay claim to those aspects of the system where I define myself as the oppressed and someone else as my oppressor, then I continually fail to see the larger picture. Any effort I might make to challenge domination is likely to fail if I am not looking accurately at the circumstances that create suffering, and thus seeing the larger picture. (p.30-31)

This thought promotes the idea that denouncing a singular case of oppression by assigning blame to one of the parties is insufficient. Moreover, it highlights the need to challenge this binary way of thinking, which assumes an inevitable hierarchy where one party must remain on top and the other at the bottom, so to enter a much more complex and nuanced politics of accountability. In this framework, every individual is compelled to examine the existent systems of domination, gaining insights into the roles they play in the maintenance and perpetuation of such mechanisms. Only in this way the struggle for freedom can succeed resulting in the liberation of both oppressors and oppressed (Freire, 1968). In this context, because "Cultural action, as historical action, is an instrument for superseding the dominant alienated and alienating culture" (p. 180), it is therefore important to underline the role that alter-institutional cultural and artistic practices emerging from the margin represent: an opportunity of creation that aims at imagining and realizing alternative

models managing to overcome this dualist thinking. As further stated by Freire: “In this sense, every authentic revolution is a cultural revolution” (p. 180).

The shift in thinking from a politics of blame to a politics of accountability also implies to move one’s attention from the personal to the collective, and consequently to contrast and resist the emphasis imposed by imperialist and capitalist values on personal identity and lifestyle. The margin, in fact, must be understood as a space of community and connection, where a sense of shared purpose can be found, and where it becomes possible to think in terms of compatibility rather than opposition. This transition results pivotal in order to “accept responsibility for fighting oppressions that may not directly affect us as individuals” (hooks, 1984, p. 62).

Only through the development of a real concern for the collective, a space of solidarity can truly be realized within which it is possible to perform acts of resistance. To achieve this aim, it is furthermore necessary to “change perspectives on power”, challenging the understanding of power as a synonym of domination and control, as this view again entails a dualism between the oppressor (the one possessing power) and the powerless victim. Instead, the notion of power must be redefined to indicate a creative and life-affirming force, and conceived as the capacity to take action. This view completely overturns the status quo allowing to see people at the margin not as victims but as holders of revolutionary power (Ibidem).

This concept is further developed by Freire (1968) when he talks about the role of the oppressed in the struggle for revolution. According to him, in order to succeed, liberation must come from the oppressed pole of society, with the support and alliance of the oppressors. In order to take place, this process must be funded in a revolutionary “co-intentional” education, including both theory and action, where:

Teachers and students (leadership and people), co-intent on reality, are both Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge. As they attain this knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as its permanent re-creators. (p. 69)

In this passage, the author explains how both central and marginal actors, once they had come to acknowledge and recognize their agency power, must engage in the deconstruction (unveiling) of the present reality as well as in its critical analysis, aiming to initiate a process of continuous re-invention and re-definition of it.

Translating the dichotomy between the dominant and the dominated (and consequently, the centre and margin) into the realm of cultural production, particularly within the concepts of institution and alter-institution art, reveals that, according to this perspective alter-institutions, (representing the “marginal” part), are called upon to take action, integrating theory and practice, as the primary catalysts for a revolution aimed at finally eliminating the polarization of these two concepts. However, it also emphasizes how in order to achieve a real breakthrough in overcoming creative stagnation and reestablishing art and culture with an active political role, it is necessary that there be a collective effort, including a radical stance on the part of the centre, consisting in the progressive deconstruction of both formal and informal structures that define these institutions.

Documenta 15, as cited by Baravalle (2022), serves as an instance of a central actor in the art world that has attempted, not without failures and controversies, to initiate a process of “becoming minor”. One significant feature elucidating the intentions behind the project was that the event was curated by a collective – and not by a singular – actor, the Ruangrupa collective. The concept of the exhibition was inspired by the Indonesian word *lumbung*, used to name a collective rice barn. Drawing from this notion, the aim of the artists’ collective was in fact to “test documenta as a possible way to share resources (cultural, symbolic, and financial) with other collectives” (Baravalle, 2022). In this way it put in place an attempt to turn one of the most central spaces of the contemporary art world into a “temporary common”, or – we could say – a margin. This attempt was not completely successful, but it may be considered useful in that it highlights a (first?) real attempt from a very central institution to adopt an alternative approach and thus to move towards the margin.

A further contribution on the topic, focusing on art practices that effectively managed to engage with spaces of marginality, has been provided by José Esteban Muñoz in his publication “Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity”

(2009). The book is built around a conceptual map of queer artistic practices that took place throughout various places and times in the history of culture. As per the author's perspective, the selected practices have created a space of possibility: wherein the realization of a (queer) futurity unfolds in the present. Therefore, these practices should not be perceived as occurring at the margins solely because they are realized by members of the queer community, as this would entail relying on the usual definition of the term, where marginality is not chosen but instead a superimposed, limiting condition. In this context, queerness assumes a more expansive significance, transcending matters of sexual orientation to articulate a comprehensive approach:

Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a then and there. [...] we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds. Queerness is a longing that propels us onward, beyond romances of the negative and toiling in the present. (p.1)

In this way, Munoz's theory is coherent with the discourse that sees marginality as a space of "radical openness" in that it reveals how art practices (and therefore institutions) can represent a space from which alternatives emerge, thus shedding light on their imaginative power of tracing the contours of a concrete utopia and redefine the horizon of the political possibilities of arts. It is in this sense, therefore that queerness may be intended as a condition of the margin. In this way, the author provides an analysis of marginality that goes beyond the previously analysed notions of space, focusing as well on its features in relation to time. He shows how sparks of a potential future – that he refers to as "futurity" – can be found in the aesthetic movements of the past and can serve as a starting point to reactivate the political imaginary of the present. This present-minded approach to history in general and specifically to art history, produces an understanding of the contemporary world as already containing a continuous of future potentialities. Embracing Ernst Bloch (1984) ideas about the relationship between art and the

utopian impulse, Muñoz explores how certain works of art can convey “anticipatory illuminations”, i.e., create a space for the imaginative representation of different worlds. Thus, artistic illusion in this context is not seen as a mere escape from reality, but as a powerful transformative force. For Bloch, in fact, art serves a utopian function by pointing towards a better future. Consequently, the concept of Utopia must be primarily understood as a critique of the present here and now, a determined negation of what merely is in favour of a desire for what should and could be. Starting from this point, it is thus possible to advance a critical analysis of cultural institutions that, refusing to leave their central position, fail to effectively perform their role of “temporal knots” witnessing the existence of a future in the present. In the book “Radical Museology or, What’s ‘Contemporary’ in Museums of Contemporary Art?” Claire Bishop (2013) expresses the pending need for the contemporary art world to reimagine museums as active, historical agents that are not expressions of the rhetoric of national pride or representative of hegemonic power structures, but instead promoters of creative questioning and dissent. According to Bishop, in fact, as museums are a collective expression of what we judge important in culture, they must be considered as spaces where debate and reflections about present values and beliefs are stimulated. Building on this idea, therefore, artworks are understood as a material testimony of what has remained from the past in the present, what was considered culturally relevant in previous historical periods. Moreover, the choices of art institutions in terms of how these artworks are exposed and presented to the audience is in turn the reflection of past narratives and ideals. In this sense, Bishop sees museums’ collections and exhibitions as chances to engage with time, as they require “to think in several tenses simultaneously: the past perfect and the future anterior” (p.15). This attitude must be necessarily adopted by cultural institutions in order to maintain an “alternative” position. Ignoring this imaginative potentiality of art, and refusing to reflect on the consequent political role deriving from it – the possibility to create potential futurities – is a missed chance to move towards a more equal and sustainable society for all. On this regard, Muñoz (2013) states that “practices of knowledge production that are content merely to cull selectively from the past, while striking a pose of positivist undertaking or empirical knowledge retrieval,



often nullify the political imagination” (p. 27). Meaning that everything that has survived from the past must always be historicized and critically analysed and understood in a dialectical confrontation with the present and the future. Moreover, he goes on explaining that “the idea is not simply to turn away from the present, as one cannot afford such move”. However, as the present is not enough for those unprivileged groups living outside normative structures (i.e., those living at the margin), “the present must be known in relation to the alternative temporal and spatial maps provided by a perception of past and future affective worlds” (p. 27). This must be the political function of art institutions. This role incorporates the perspective proposed by Stuart Hall concerning art production and consumption, where he promotes a critical practice that recognizes how reality “is not constituted outside of representation, but within it” and invites us to see art products “not as mirrors held up to reflect what already exists, but as that form of representation that is capable of constituting us as subjects of a new kind and thus allows us to discover who we are” (1989, p.80)<sup>15</sup>. This entails engaging in a process that allows to see history as counter-memory and thus to use it to better understand the present and re-invent the future.

In the next chapter, this analysis will focus on further exploring the political role and possibilities of alter-institutions as organizations taking action from the margin. In order to do so, one case study will be presented, with the aim of providing a clearer view on how these actors practically work, both through an analysis of their internal functions and delving into their ways of relating to the external environment. The organization analysed is Sale Docks, an independent space engaging with art practices and politics since its foundation in 2007 by a group of activists in the heart of Venice. The case study is preceded by an introductory part that describes the methodology employed, thus clarifying how the research has been conducted. Additionally, to give a general context, the first part of the chapter consists of an overview of the cultural panorama of the city. The aim of this sub-chapter is to provide an answer to the question: why Venice? Consequently, it seeks

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<sup>15</sup> A “constituent” function that he discusses in relation to representation, but which can be extended to institutions

to explain what role marginal alter-institutions can play in a city where the production and presentation of contemporary art is heavily institutionalized.

## CHAPTER 3

### **Alter–institutional practices in Venice: the case of Sale Docks**

The aim of this final chapter is to clarify the possibilities and challenges inherent in alter–institutional practices and actions through the analysis of a concrete example, offering a comprehensive understanding of their role in the ongoing redefinition of the contemporary. In order to reach this goal, then, the primary step will consist in investigating whether alter–institutions indeed serve as a potentially viable alternative to the current neoliberal, institutionalized model characterizing the contemporary art world. This exploration seeks to determine their ability to imagine and advocate new perspectives on pressing global political issues through aesthetic practices and art production, thereby radically engaging with the contradictions of the present. This extends to discussions of critical issues such as citizenship, labour, urban planning, policy–making (both within and beyond the cultural sector), representation and sustainability. In a second step, the research then delves into an analysis of the processes, lines of action and decision–making mechanisms that support this transformative potential, with the aim of understanding the complex dynamics at play: it studies the *how*.

The subject at the centre of this analysis will be Sale Dock, an independent cultural space funded after an occupation movement initiated by a group of activists (mostly workers and students within the cultural sector) in 2007, in Venice. The occupation of the private space within the complex of the *Magazzini del Sale* – then unused and owned by the Municipality of Venice – where Sale Docks was born and is still located, was the first of its kind to take place in Italy. However, it set an example and gave rise to a number of other similar practices throughout the country – the most important of which are those of Macao in Milan, Teatro Valle Occupato in Rome and Ex Asilo Filangieri in Naples. The actions carried out by these movements, starting with the occupation of a space aimed at its readaptation as an art centre, have inaugurated a new way of producing culture at the urban level. They have opened up a new possibility of a third way, beyond the dichotomy between private and public

spaces – which until then had been considered the only two possible alternatives – towards a new horizon: that of the common.

The chapter is structured in two main parts: the first consisting of an introduction to the history of Sale Docks, with a focus and description of some of the actions and practices that have characterized it. The organization is analysed and understood within the alter–institutional context described in depth in the previous chapters. This part of the research, therefore, represents an attempt to provide a practical, real–life application of the theoretical framework previously exposed. Particular relevance and attention are reserved to the relationship between Sale Docks and the general institutional cultural panorama of the city of Venice. The reason behind this choice lies in the fact that root–taking practices focused on the “local” dimension represent one of the main concerns and prerogatives of alter–institutional agency.

Moreover, Venice is a peculiar case to analyse, being a relatively small city that nevertheless hosts a very large number of some of the most important international institutions in the field of contemporary art. And, even more importantly, being the home of the Biennale, an organization which, in recent years, has had a profound impact on the cultural offer of the whole city. The second part of the chapter, instead, reports and comments some parts of the interviews conducted with three members of the Sale Docks collective. This part is introduced with an explanation of the research method, selected on the basis of the desired aims of the research. In conclusion, the evidence collected is analysed and discussed.

### **3.1 Sale Docks: history and urban context**

Sale Docks was founded in 2007 as an activist space for the research and production of contemporary art and politics (Baravalle, 2021) in the heart of the historical city of Venice, after the occupation of an old deposit, part of the *Magazzini del Sale* complex. The space had been in a state of disuse and abandonment for most of the 1900s. Towards the end of the century, however, some parts of the building were reallocated and used for several art events. Moreover, starting from those same years, many other buildings in the surrounding area were bought by private companies and turned into art spaces of various forms. In this context, pushed by the need to take action in order to interrupt this transformation process affecting an entire

neighbourhood, a group of activists, united by the shared experience of *centri sociali*, decided to occupy one of the abandoned warehouses owned at the time by the Municipality of Venice. The central positioning of the space within what was then designated as the “art kilometre”, or, as Marco Baravalle termed it, an actual “museum district”, constituted a key factor influencing the selection of the site by the group of activists who took part in the occupation. These definitions referred to the notable concentration of art spaces situated between the museum Gallerie dell'Accademia and Punta della Dogana. The latter, acquired in 2005 by the French magnate Francois Pinault, served as a venue to showcase part of his prestigious collection of contemporary art, along with hosting internationally acclaimed temporary exhibitions. In addition, in the adjacent building to Sale Docks, within the same complex, Fondazione Vedova (designed by Renzo Piano) was inaugurated in 2009.



*Figure 5: The entrance of the space of Sale Docks at Magazzini del Sale and the mezzanine floor designed and built in collaboration with ReBiennale.*

The group of occupiers, mainly composed of activists coming from the experience of *centri sociali*, included mainly university students – often involved in various cultural institutions in the city (as interns or temporary workers) – and some cultural workers and artists. The aim of the occupation and the subsequent creation of Sale Docks was to intervene against the process of “artistification” that the city of Venice was undergoing. The process described above was spurred by a neo-liberal

perspective guiding the local administration's decision-making. This approach, aimed at increasing revenues from the tourism sector, was in fact reinforced by a set of coherent cultural policies. Consequently, this resulted in the proliferation of exhibition spaces and cultural events, contributing to the progressive depopulation of the city. This occupation was the first of many analogous actions that unfolded across various Italian cities in the subsequent years. Two notable instances of comparable artistic occupations, occurring a few years later, include that of Macao in Milan and Teatro Valle Occupato in Rome.

Macao was an independent activist cultural centre born from the desire of a group of art workers to initiate a reflection on the concept of culture as a common good, that could unite theory and practice (Cossu, 2014). In 2011, the Art Workers group, backed by other similar Italian entities (including members of Sale Docks) and enjoying widespread citizen participation, ultimately identified a location for the establishment of Macao, after numerous temporary occupations of symbolic spaces throughout the city of Milan. They settled on a building that had remained abandoned for years, originally selected and designated for a redevelopment project that, nevertheless, was never implemented. After a decade of activity, the space was closed down in 2021 due to a confluence of factors, including escalating pressures from the city's institutions and challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.



Figure 6: A sign on the entrance of Macao says “We will not go back to normality because normality was the problem”, October 1, 2020 in Milan, Italy. Photo by Diana Bagnoli. Courtesy Getty Images.

At the time of the occupation, Teatro Valle was one of Rome's oldest theatres still active (Borchi, 2017). Established in 1727, it had represented a pivotal cultural institution for the city until all the activities were suddenly suspended in 2011, due to the dissolution of the *Ente Teatrale Italiano*, the Italian Committee for Theatres. This event triggered a resistance movement among workers in the performing arts sectors, driven by the determination to oppose any attempt of privatizing the space. Therefore, after the occupation, the theatre underwent a transformation process, turning into a self-governed space. In this context, the space management was assigned to public assemblies, and decision making was conducted through direct democracy. The success of this initiative among the public motivated the group of activists-cultural workers to initiate the process of becoming a proper cultural foundation, seeking official recognition from an authorized jurisdictional authority. This decision reflects an effort to establish a new institution of the commons, seeking to disrupt the influence of political parties in cultural production and serve as a catalyst for the development of innovative, bottom-up cultural policies. Conceived as a realm beyond the conventional definition of public or private ownership, the envisioned space was intended to be managed by a collaborative community of artists and citizens united in their dedication to the common good. However, the statute proposed for the establishment of the new foundation was rejected due to the overall absence of essential legal prerequisites. A key issue in this decision was the fact that the assembly lacked legal possession of the theatre property.



Figure 7: Teatro Valle Occupato, October 2014. Photo by: Tiziana Tomasulo.

Finally, on 2 March 2012, “La Balena” collective occupied the building of “Ex Asilo Filangieri” in the historical centre of Naples, raising the issue of the lack of space and rights of the so-defined “immaterial workers”, i.e. workers in the arts and cultural industries. In 1995 the space, which had been abandoned since the earthquake occurred in 1980, was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site and thus selected for a long process of redevelopment, until, in 2013, it was assigned as the main venue for that year’s edition of the Forum of Cultures. The occupying collective, however, had already taken charge of the space with the aim of relaunching its effective use as a space of cultural production at the service of the community in the neighbourhood. From the very first months of activity, in fact, the work of the residents has been driven by the will to consolidate the space as an artistic and cultural *common*, characterized by the sharing of spaces and means of production and paying particular attention to the principles of accessibility and inclusivity. This thus allowed everyone to participate within a framework of shared rules and intentions. The peculiarity of this specific case lies in the fact that, in 2015, the space was officially recognized in its form of *common* by the local administration of Naples. After a legal declaration by the Municipality of Naples, the experience was in fact consolidated: the space was recognized as a common good and its “community of reference” was institutionalised.



Figure 8: The entrance of Ex Asilo Filangieri in the first days after the occupation in March 2012. Photo by: Riccardo Siano.



Although numerous distinctions can be identified through a deeper comparative analysis of these three experiences, it seems clear that there has been a tendency that has promoted the emergence of cultural occupations and, as a consequence, the creation of cultural alter-institutions. This process highlights the imperative to reconsider culture from a perspective centred on active public participation and inclusion of citizens in decision-making processes concerning the cities they live in. This implies an acknowledgment of the significant role that culture and art play in this context, compelling a redefinition of their meaning. This distinctive function represents the peculiarity that drives the so-called “cultural alter-institutions” which take action not only to simply produce art on the basis of political content but, much more ambitiously, to enact political change through a new idea of culture.

The establishment of these movements has then inaugurated a new horizon, creating new possible imaginaries for the organization and production of culture at the urban level. They have created a solid and tangible space in which cultural production has been rethought as a right of the city, as a space where new institutional architectures must be imagined in the name of the common good (Baravalle, 2021). The revolutionary act of the occupation – in the sense given to the term by Negri and Hardt (2009) – is a first step to go against the state of isolation in which art workers most often find themselves, allowing to regain a collective dimension and perceive to be part of a community. The two authors, in fact, describe revolutionary movements as insurrectional intersections that contribute to the making of the *multitude*. This composition of singularities, however, is intended differently with respect to what is traditionally conceived as an alliance or coalition: “the multitude is composed through the encounters of singularities within the common” (p. 350). Meaning that this process does not consist of different groups simply coming together against a common enemy, but instead it implies that the different singular identities are liberated and transformed in one singular entity: the multitude or common. The process of articulation and composition described must be determined and sustained by democratic decision making, which allows insurrections to become instituent and institutionalized revolutions. Revolution is therefore perceived as an ongoing process of transformation that arises from within social relations, not as something centred around a singular event, but instead as a continuous process carried out by the “multitude”.

This then can stimulate the initiation of a constituent process that opens a discussion on the organizational and productive models, as well as on decision making processes and on participation. By trying to avoid the risk of becoming mere spaces of theoretical resistance and on the contrary by making themselves the bearers of an alternative, real, viable, sharable proposal, these spaces have the capacity to take action as promoters of a genuinely different cultural model – participatory, democratic and critical – centred on the idea of the common good.

The concept of “commons” has a long history, and its definition has been developing over time. The first scholar to conceptualize this notion was Elinor Ostrom’s (2010), a political economist who focused her research on the study of common-pool resources. Based on a categorization of goods according to two main criteria: subtractability of use and difficulty of excluding potential beneficiaries, she theorized a matrix that allowed to distinguish four distinct types of resources: private goods, club goods, public goods and commons (or common pool). She understood common pool resources as goods “depicting a high subtractability of use and being characterized by a high difficulty of excluding potential beneficiaries” (Euler, 2015, p. 27).

For the sake of my argument, I rely hereby on the theory developed by the Ostrom in her work “Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action” (2015), where the author explores the potential development of governance structures that could sustainably manage their collective use, without incurring in the phenomenon of the so-called “tragedy of the commons”<sup>16</sup>. Within this context she demonstrates how communities, under certain conditions, could develop effective rules and institutions to ensure the non-exclusive use of common-pool, i.e., their employment for the advantage of the whole community. First, she underlines the necessity to institute clear and well-defined boundaries for the common pool resource to avoid ambiguity and prevent free-riding. Moreover, she stresses how those who make use of the common resources (and spaces, in this case) should be actively

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<sup>16</sup> The “Tragedy of the Commons” is an essay published by Garrett Hardin's in 1968, which suggested that when individuals have access to shared resources, they always act in their self-interest, thus depleting and degrading the good and resulting in a “tragedy” for the whole community.

involved in the decision-making process regarding their use and management, in order to ensure that diverse perspectives and needs are considered. For the same reasons, the users should also be able to self-monitor the actions and decisions taken by the community, effectively enforcing rules internally to solve eventual conflicts.

Ostrom's theory has initiated an interdisciplinary debate, in which all the most urgent global political issues, (from access to water and education, to the privatisation of urban spaces, to the commodification of the body and the control of the internet), have to deal and confront themselves with the notions of the *common*. Throughout time, in fact, the concept has developed and the notion of commons has been defined as a "social form of tangible or intangible matter determined by commoning", which refers to a "selforganized (re)produsage and mediation of peers who aim at satisfying their needs" (Euler, 2015, p. 27).

Within the "Art World", the idea of common has taken practical form in the context of cultural occupations. Despite all of the existing discrepancies among the cases discussed above, in fact, all of these experiences have focused their attention on the revitalization of underused resources that were then in this way returned to their community, with the aim of improving their well-being through cultural production. In this context therefore, cultural production is perceived as having a scope that goes well beyond the mere aesthetic discourse. It means instead creating a space for the people, outside of the constraining normative rules of the neoliberal market, where arts serve as a mean to foster discussions on the most diverse issues. This therefore make it necessary that these entities focus on and pay specific attention to the local dimension, while avoiding the risk of descending into localism. Being "bound" to a specific space, alter-institutions must seriously pose the problem of establishing roots within a given context. This emphasis on rootedness also serves as a counteraction to the spatial and temporal framework inherent in the neo-liberal art system. By promoting the complete autonomy of artistic practice from spatial or temporal constraints, this model frequently results in practices that remain inevitably entangled in the neo-liberal temporality of the event and in its constant mobility, taking place within an illusionary space: static and conflict-free.

In the peculiar case of Venice, the foundation of Sale Docks comes from an attempt to contrast the ongoing process of so-called "museification" of the city, a trend

that had emerged in recent decades. It is important to highlight the distinction between this phenomenon and the more debated idea of the creative city theorized by Richard Florida (2002), which is instead more applicable to the cases of Milan and Rome described above. The concept of the “creative city” theorizes the evolving relationship between urban development and cultural production. Richard Florida, in his seminal work “The Rise of the Creative Class” (2002) argues that cities' economic success is increasingly tied to the presence of a creative and diverse workforce. He posits that fostering an environment that attracts the so-defined “creative class”, composed by artists, musicians, designers, and other creative professionals enhances a city's overall competitiveness and economic prosperity. In this context, therefore, the focus shifts from traditional industries to knowledge-based and creative sectors. The implementation of public policies in support of this idea has however raised questions about the social consequences, particularly concerning the potential displacement of existing communities and the transformation of once-affordable neighbourhoods into exclusive cultural enclaves.

The urban areas affected by this process may in fact experience the substitution of the original communities with new “gentries”, what has been defined as “gentrification”. In the case of Venice, as the cultural initiatives taking place in the city consist for the most part of temporary events, the progressive substitution of the local community has followed a different dynamic with respect to the process described by Florida. Rather than a resident creative class, in fact, it is the influx of tourists that in this case has replaced the local community. This change is a direct result of the city's cultural policy, which through the active promotion of numerous events, made Venice more and more attractive to the tourist sector. For these reasons, therefore, the “gentry” that substituted the local community (i.e., the only group able to pay the ever-increasing costs of living in the city), is not a permanent, resident one, but it is instead temporary and associated to tourism.

This transformation has led to what Agemben (2005) termed the “museification” of the city: which takes place when things are made impossible to use. In this sense, therefore, the “museum” must not be understood only as a physical space but, instead, it denotes a separate dimension, where all that was once held as decisive and true, is no longer perceived as such. In the case of Venice, the whole city has been transformed

in a museum: i.e., it has been made impossible to use, to experience, to inhabit; the city is not even a city anymore as it does not have a residential population.

For Baravalle (2021), going against this process of “museification” necessarily implies rethinking the idea of politics as something of social use, while denying its reduction to a mere cultural product within the neoliberal capitalist artistic circuit. This transformation of the city into a museum, can furthermore be described as the progressive substitution of the urban *devenir*, i.e. what characterizes the city as a living, contradicting, vibrant organism in continuous metamorphosis, with the notion of the city as a *souvenir*. The process of becoming an urban *souvenir* refers to the transformation that a city undergoes when the events taking place in it are no longer unpredictable manifestations of life, but instead constrained and methodically defined spatial and temporal representations, aligned with the neoliberal ideals. In this context, therefore, the city becomes the background of an unceasing alternation of various kinds of events, in a constant attempt to demonstrate its pretended uniqueness and unrepeatability. This process supports and is vice versa supported by public policies that promote *touristification* and housing speculation. Consequently, it contributes to the depopulation of the city, leading to the complete erosion of its authenticity. This transformation turns the city into a museum, as defined by Agamben, effectively placing it at the disposal of the visiting public. It is therefore possible to envision a cyclical pattern of mutual influence and support between the urban policies implemented (directly and indirectly affecting the cultural sector) and the development of an exceedingly institutionalized cultural landscape, dominated by international private organizations, producing substantial profits. Consequently, it is reasonable to posit a connection between this process and the state of immobility and stagnation within these institutions. This condition renders them incapable of serving as generators of new solutions and alternatives to address the urgent political issues of the contemporary era, instead bringing them closer to the model of “neutral” cultural production discussed in the previous chapter. Within this context, therefore, art institutions act as “white cubes”, i.e., as neutral containers where art is presented as something completely detached from reality and only aimed at generating aesthetic appreciation.

In this context, the Biennale stands out as the most conspicuous example, indisputably being the most influential participant in this ongoing process. In the article “On the Biennale’s Ruins? Inhabiting the void, covering the distance” Marco Baravalle (2020) explores the Biennale management's response to the challenges posed by the COVID–19 pandemic, where they sought to “cover the void”, as the traditional event could not be held. Using this initiative as a starting point, Baravalle delves into a reflection on the history of the institution. His focus is particularly directed at analysing the role the Biennale has played in the transformation of the city of Venice, with a specific emphasis on the last two decades. His argument revolves around the missed opportunity that the 2020 exhibition, “Le Muse inquiete. La Biennale di Venezia di fronte alla storia”, held in the central pavilion at Giardini, represented for the institution. Occurring during a pivotal moment of global crisis, when everything was being reevaluated, the exhibition could have been a chance for the Biennale to take a step back, examine its history and transformations, and engage in a critical reflection on its role and significance within the contemporary, ever–evolving society, thus confronting itself with the external environment.

This introspective analysis could have provoked a re–evaluation of the role of contemporary art and its institutions both in the city of Venice and, in general, in contemporary societies. However, the author maintains that the exhibition ultimately failed to meet these expectations. Instead of using the moment to question and challenge its past, in terms of management model and purpose, in fact, the exhibition resulted in a self–celebration of the institution's history, with no mention of any potential act of discontinuity in the future. Instead, it seemed to reaffirm the unchanged identity of the event without addressing the need for evolution or adaptation in response to the evolving socio–cultural landscape. In this context, Baravalle acknowledges and comments the relationship that has developed in recent years between the Biennale, as a globally renowned, large–scale, attractive event, and the city of Venice. He describes Venice as “a mere beneficiary of its presence rather than a serious potential interlocutor”, thus suggesting that the city has been more of a passive recipient of the Biennale's influence rather than an active and engaged partner in meaningful dialogue. This reflection sheds light on the strong (and ever growing) connection existing between art and cultural events – and thus the institutions directly

responsible for their implementation – with substantial financial gains for the city. This factor becomes a crucial consideration in the context of public governance and local administration.

In her very exhaustive article “Culture Class: Art, Creativity, Urbanism, Part I” published on *e-flux Journal* in 2010, Martha Rosler explores and comments the role that culture has played in postwar capitalism, which she maintains to be “pivotal”. The origins of this relationship can be traced back to the progressive process of transformation caused by the takeover of some major city neighbourhoods by what has been defined as “the creative class” (Florida, 2002). The most evident and first example of this shift took place in New York starting from the 1960 with the “requalification” of an industrial district in what has then become the epicentre of the global art world at that time: Soho. Attracted by the low rents, artists began to move their studios into the neighbourhood, soon leading to the opening of art galleries, shops and restaurants. Former industrial spaces were thus converted into lofts, setting in motion a mechanism whereby the former population was soon replaced by the “art world”. According to Richard Florida, the reason behind the strong consequent affirmation of this process in most western cities around the world was stimulated by the belief that cities failing to attract, maintain, and facilitate the activities of the creative class were much less likely to achieve high levels of prosperity and economic growth. He furthermore demonstrated that three main characteristics are necessary in order to successfully attract the “creative class”, the so-called “the three ‘T’s’”: talent (thus a highly talented/educated/skilled population), tolerance (the presence of a diverse community) and technology (i.e., the technological infrastructure necessary to fuel an entrepreneurial culture).

Such cities, furthermore, are comprised of cultural amenities that stimulate creative expression, conversation and opportunities for social networking. Drawing on Jacobs’ classic work “The Death and Life of Great American Cities” (1961), Florida in fact argued that such neighbourhoods are walkable, constituted by a substantial amount of mixed-use spaces (residential/commercial), and offer ample opportunities for creatively stimulating social interaction. It is interesting to notice, as also highlighted by the sociologist Sharon Zukin in her works, how what may appear as a spontaneous process was actually fostered by precise economic and political motivations strongly

desired by the cities' governments. Furthermore, this process can be understood as a symptom of a changing economic paradigm: i.e., the passage from the Fordist to a post-Fordist economic model, which signed the birth of the "creative industry". In this context, the rise of service and knowledge-based industries led to the commodification of everyday life under capitalism, where social relationships and human experiences are reduced to goods to be consumed. According to Boltanski and Chiappello (2005), the historical shift that took place after 1968 has led to a change in "the spirit of capitalism", changing its mechanisms of survival and legitimation in society. Capitalism has thus not only survived the crisis generated by the cultural revolution movements of the 1960/70s, but its pursuit of profit has even expanded, leading to the colonization and control of every aspect of life by the logic of the market.

Within this context, the authors recognize the formation of a new city: the so-called "projective city", in which all social relations and life experiences are mediated and have the scope of legitimizing capitalist values. Following this discourse, thus, it is possible to go back to Richard Florida's idea of the "creative city", where the "atmosphere" and "buzz" of a specific neighbourhood are to be recognized as direct sources of economic profit. However, the negative consequences of this model, and its unsustainability from many different perspectives, have been widely demonstrated and particularly emphasized by the challenges brought about by the Covid-19 pandemics.

The shortcomings of the neoliberal model become apparent, for instance, by examining the work conditions of the people employed in the organization and production of these events, or, again, their environmental impact. While the obtained financial results and figures might have suggested successful management, the evidence reported above shows the presence of a pressing need to rethink these events in alignment with the workers' and citizens' needs. The goal is to reclaim the institution's *imaginative* role – following Deleuzian terms. As explained in the previous chapter, in fact, Deleuze (1977) believes that art institutions possess the power of *fabulation*, meaning that they are able to create new instituted and institutional realities, expanding beyond traditional concepts and structures. Thereby, this capacity to generate and propose new possibilities for the future, must be put into practice, in order to prevent the institution from acting as a tourism promotion agency while instead enabling its function as a global critical tool.



This transformation requires a change of perspective which, as proposed by Baravalle, could start from a reconsideration of the role of the institution's archive as "the source of counter-histories, beyond the ideological univocal narration of a neoliberal art institution: the archive as the undomesticated memory of an institution, not a cornerstone of its identity, but a mutating virus mining its epistemological normality". In order to achieve this purpose, some parallel potential changes are proposed. For example, to challenge the monolithic interpretation of arts as booster for financial growth, it would be necessary to escape the rhetoric of the creative city, and instead embrace the idea of the "caring city", capable of fostering forms of common life, and considering new conditions of *transindividuality*. This would entail challenging a reductionist view of individuals as isolated entities and instead promoting an understanding of human existence and social relations that goes beyond individuality, emphasizing the interconnectedness and interdependence of individuals within a *communal* society. Moreover, it could be useful to move away from the imperative of "exhibiting" and, instead, enter a logic of "inhabiting". In practical terms, this could entail, for instance, advocating for a permanent use of the pavilions. This approach would not only encourage collaboration with local workers but also provide a means to break away from the frenetic time constraints inherent in event-based model. An additional solution could be to expand the scope of the Biennale beyond the confines of Arsenale and Giardini, actively engaging with real life practices within different areas of the city.

Another salient topic discussed by Baravalle in this context is that of mobility. According to the author, the essential paradigm shift in this case consists in rejecting the idea of entrepreneurial nomadism to instead embrace radical permanence. He argues:

We must rethink permanence, duration, mobility, we must rethink engagement with our context in political terms. Radical permanence is made of a different temporal matrix and of course it entails a different relation with the space, one that is both within and outside the borders of the protected art space, an affirmation of its autonomy and at the same time a threat to its existence. Radical permanence does not mean the absence of mobility, on the contrary the right to

move of everybody (no matter what race, class or gender) is an essential feature.  
(2020, p. 11)

This explains the importance of rootedness within alter–institutional practices as a relevant political act with a specific focus on the local urban territory. Building on these premises, therefore, it becomes important to raise some questions that shed light on the relationship between formal institutions, such as the Biennale, and alter–institutions, like Sale. In particular, it may be useful to understand whether it would be more effective – in order foster the potentialities of the art world as a space of radical imagination – to stimulate cooperation between the two or, on the contrary, to argue for the complete rejection of the institutional world. According to the alter–institutional perspective, the answer lies in a dialectical form of resistance, thus entailing a response inspired by and aligned with notions of abolitionism rather than reformism. While advocating for the complete abolition of certain foundational aspects of the present institutional model, this approach doesn't ideologically dismiss the possibility of collaborations aimed at reconstructing the institution on new premises, thus recognizing its fundamental role within society. However, such reconstruction can only occur after a transformative phase where the prevailing (hegemonic) operational methods of traditional institutionality are dismantled. This approach can be interpreted as the realization of the alter–institution as a “marginal” space. Drawing from bell hooks’ theory of marginality explored in depth in the previous chapter, in fact, it could be reasonable to argue that alter-institutions in this context can perform the function of shedding light on urgent issues and problematize methodologies in a manner that the centre, due to its privileged positioning, is unable to pursue. Being accustomed to take action from within what is considered to be the “norm”, so-defined “central” institutions are not capable of seeing the problematic, unsustainable “margins” of the industry. On the other hand, actors positioned at the limits of the centre, but outside of it, maintain a dual perspective, allowing them to have more comprehensive understanding. This thus demonstrates the importance of adopting a marginal perspective in order to imagine alternative possibilities. In some cases, therefore, a potential collaboration between the two actors may be considered beneficial: where alter–institutions can serve as guides in the process of reconstruction that institutions undergo. This can exclusively take place by going “inside and against” the institution,

without however being absorbed by the neoliberal system and thus maintaining an alternative and autonomous position.

This concept can be exemplified by numerous projects that have been carried out by Sale Docks in various forms of collaboration with a number of institutions, inside and outside of Venice. In order to clarify the concept of dialectic resistance, and shed light on the methods employed by Sale Docks to take action as an alter-institution, the next few pages report a brief description of a selection of the projects carried out by the members of the collective in the course of the years.

The project Open#6 (2013–2014), was born within the program of Sale Docks as a response to one of the fundamental aims of the space: to realize an artistic production that, not following the rules of the institutional mainstream system, was more critical, free and participated. The project, therefore (which had its first edition “Open#0” in 2009<sup>17</sup>), can be read as an experiment, born with the purpose of going beyond the traditional dispositive of the exhibition, questioning the typical notions of artist, curator, spectator, while also problematizing the function of artworks. It aimed at initiating a critical review of the mainstream art sector which often, in organizing events and exhibitions, ends up reproducing precarious working conditions (such as unpaid labour), thereby contributing to the phenomenon of “city brandization” – as their presence and implementation increases the perceived touristic attractiveness of the city – instead of fostering practices of care directed towards the well-being of the community. The project aimed to encourage participation with the goal of uncovering existing contradictions and, in turn, taking actions to fuel dissent rather than reinforcing consent. For this purpose, the collective made the decision to issue an open call, inviting anyone interested to participate. The open invitation was advertised through an analogic campaign consisting of flyers and posters directed specifically to the city. The result was the organization of public assembly that took place in the space

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<sup>17</sup> The Open project has been transformed over the years through a continuous process of critique and reflection on previous editions, which has allowed it to move closer to its objectives and also to evolve according to changes in the external and internal environment. In fact, the initial formula, which remained unchanged until 2012, was based on a more traditional mechanism, in which the members of the Sale collective wrote an open call addressing artists (mainly resident in the area) to allow them to exhibit their works in a group exhibition.

of Sale on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of October 2013. During this first meeting, the participants discussed and selected a number of salient topics they wished to address. Subsequently, they formed groups to work on these chosen themes, all of which were somehow related to the central subject of the research—focusing on the opportunities and challenges of cultural work within the Venetian lagoon. The project's duration was intentionally left undefined initially, allowing complete temporal flexibility for the development of the process, which, in the end, lasted for approximately six months. Throughout this period, various activities and meetings were organized, complementing the actual artworks that were later exhibited as part of the final exhibition held in the Sale Docks space. Part of the funds needed to realize the exhibition were raised through self-financing means, including the organization of events and parties. For the rest, the initiative was realized thanks to the contribution and support of REbiennale<sup>18</sup>, a collaborative platform founded in 2008, which provided all the materials necessary for the exhibition setup. Thus, the operation, rooted in a critical approach to the institutional functioning – in this case the wasteful use of materials – takes a constructive perspective. Thanks to Sale's alter-institutional view, new possibilities are in fact imagined and invented, and ultimately employed to support their projects.

A similar approach can be observed in the context of the “<<180°>>. Oltre la crisi, per la pratica del comune” initiative, put in place by Sale in 2011. The project was initiated following a request from the Institute Ramon Lull, the cultural branch of the Catalan regional government, to rent the exhibition space and use it to host an exhibition that would have been part of the Venice International Art Exhibition of that year as a collateral event. Instead of adhering to the conventional model governing such relationships, often described as an “event-driven business” where economic performance is the sole criterion for evaluation, Sale Docks embraced this request as an opportunity for transformation. In response, therefore, the collective members proposed dividing the space in half (to maintain its ongoing activities) and replacing

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<sup>18</sup> Now transformed into a full-fledged enterprise under the name R3B, the project was responsible for de-installing exhibitions (especially, but not only, within the Venice Biennale) and, instead of disposing of the leftovers (very often in excellent condition), donating them to local entities engaged in social work.

the conventional rent payment with the establishment of a genuine collaboration. The Institute's funding was then used to support the organization of a program of seminars around the concept of “crisis”, with a number of guests coming from all over the world. Given that this project was executed as part of the official program of the Biennale, it can be regarded as an attempt to cultivate an alternative model within the institution. This approach allows for the exploration of collaborative efforts while consistently maintaining a critical and autonomous position. Consequently, it leads to the realization of alternative futurities, opening up paths that the institution alone would not be able to visualize.

The most recent project implemented by Sale Docks, with the name “Biennialocene”, still in progress, can also be interpreted as both a strong critique but also, in some ways, an effort towards a potential collaboration. In this context, the alter–institution, positioned at the margin (an essential condition for pursuing this type of radical discourse), serves as a valuable tool—capable of modifying the work in a positive sense, setting itself against the institution, while simultaneously acknowledging its role and potential, particularly in terms of outreach. “Biennialocene” is an assembly of art and culture workers in Venice. It was created in May 2023 out of a performance–investigation conducted by Sale Docks and the Institute of Radical Imagination which premiered on the occasion of the German Pavilion’s opening on May 19<sup>th</sup> 2023, in the context of the 18th International Architecture Exhibition—La Biennale di Venezia, drawing on the experiences of cultural workers in Venice and beyond. The assembly is a place of self–organization and mobilization against the conditions of precariousness and exploitation that characterize the city's arts sector. During several public assemblies that took place from June to October 2023, hundreds of workers collectively wrote the “Metropolitan Charter of Cultural Work”. Its peculiarity (in a sector where precariousness is favoured by fragmentation and individualization) is that it was born out of a transversal confrontation, with the aim of affirming the rights of workers with different tasks, contractualization and professional aspirations: cultural mediators, cleaners, artists, performers, curators, guards, hired staff or self–employed professionals. The campaign is aimed at proposing the Charter to the city's institutions, giving them the opportunity to adopt it and, thereby, making them publicly accountable for the decisions they take. The process aims to convince

as many of the city's cultural institutions as possible – museums, foundations, cooperatives and companies – to adopt the Charter. This would represent a decisive step forward in the field of labour rights in the arts and culture sector.

The consequent step in the implementation of the “Biennialocene” project took place on the 28<sup>th</sup> of October, when the document was presented to the public during a sit-in that took place in front of the gates of the Giardini of the XVIII Venice Architecture Biennale. The objective was to provoke the organization of a meeting with the management of the Biennale to discuss the adoption of the Charter and urge them to implement measures aligned with the Charter's demands, particularly aimed at improving the working conditions of their employees.



Figure 9: “BIENNALOCENE”, Assembly at Sale Docks, June 8, 2023.



Figure 10: “BIENNALOCENE”, Action at Giardini della Biennale, Ottobre 28, 2023.  
Photo by Niccolò Zanatta.

The way in which the projects was carried out across its various stages serves as an illustration of the methodology frequently employed within Sale Docks' actions: drawing inspiration from the militant political tradition of the Italian workerists in the 1960s<sup>19</sup>. This research methodology, combining practice and theory, was defined by Baravalle as follows:

The so-called Conricerca [Co-research] [...] was not a quest for knowledge *on* the subjects but *with* the subjects, implying an end to the distinction between the theoretical and the political. It offered a way to interpret the process of knowledge production not as a single moment prior to a transformation in the status quo, but as a participant in the transformation itself. (2023, p. 64)

In fact, in this context, the performance does not only represent the result of the investigation, but it must be understood as part of the research itself, and vice versa. Furthermore, it is important to stress how the research does not conclude with the investigation or with a theoretical report of the findings. Instead, it continues through a process of ongoing transformation: beginning with the performance, which then inspires the implementation of the public assemblies, and finally culminates with the practice carried out within the Biennale. This approach not only blurs the distinctions between theory and practice but also dismantles the boundaries separating artistic operation from political militancy. Again, in the words of Baravalle: “art and militant investigations have at least one thing in common: When they insist on having the last

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<sup>19</sup> The Italian workerist left movement, also known as Operaiismo (workerism), was a radical political and intellectual movement that emerged in Italy starting from the beginning of the 1960s. It was closely associated with the industrial working class and sought to understand and challenge the dynamics of capitalist production, with a particular focus on the role of workers in shaping social and economic relations. One key aspect of the workerist movement was its rejection of traditional Marxist theory and its emphasis on the agency of the working class. Consequently, the workerist movement developed a unique research methodology known as *con-ricerca* or co-research. This approach involved active participation in and collaboration with the working class, particularly in industrial settings. Researchers engaged directly with workers to document and analyze their experiences. The goal was to generate a bottom-up understanding of the dynamics of capitalist production and class struggle. The workerists were interested in uncovering the “working class perspective” and believed that traditional academic research often failed to grasp the lived realities of workers on the shop floor. Through *con-ricerca*, they aimed to bridge the gap between theory and practice, developing a more grounded and relevant analysis of capitalist society.

word, they end up becoming a gravestone for the possible; but when they succeed in embracing what is yet to come, they retain the radical character of a premise.” (rif)

To further clarify Sale’s role and participation to the cultural world within and beyond the urban context of Venice, the next part of this chapter will report a series of interviews that have been conducted with a few members of the collective, who will give their different perspectives on the practices they have carried out and on their personal views as active participants. The following analysis aims to dig deeper in understanding the role of alter-institutions as marginal actors within the institutional cultural context. Moreover, its purpose is to explore their functioning as promoters of an alternative view, capable of generating art practices that can construct an elsewhere with respect to the social context in which they operate, pointing to new potential forms of living (Rancière, 2014).

### **3.2 Interviews**

This part of the chapter reports and discusses the evidence emerged from the research conducted through individual interviews with three members of the Sale Docks collective. The interviews consist of five discursive questions which, as indicated above, were posed to privileged witnesses, i.e., in sociological terms, people who, due to the particular role they play as active participants within the organization, possess first-hand information that may be useful for the investigation. The methodology employed in this research is therefore the semi-structured interview, during which each respondent had to answer preset open-ended questions in-depth, with a semi-structured interview guide, i.e., a schematic presentation by the interviewer of the questions and topics that need to be explored (Cardano, 2011). These semi-structured, in-depth interviews were all conducted during individual meetings with each of the three respondents, which on average lasted for about thirty minutes.

The interviews with Marco Baravalle and Davide Giacometti have been carried out during in-person meetings, which respectively took place on the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> of January 2024, in Venice. The interview with Roberta Da Soller has been conducted through an online meeting, on the 19<sup>th</sup> of January 2024.



The results offer an insider's perspective on the ways in which alter-institutions operate, on the role that these realities play within contemporary society and on their objectives, also taking into account their relationship with the external environment. In this way, the research aims to analyse this empirical documentation and compare it with the theory discussed up to this point in this paper. This effort involves examining both the emerging evidence in support of the theoretical arguments, as well as identifying the presence of any potential contrasts.

The first question the respondents were asked concerned their own personal experience as members of Sale Docks. The question was: *First, I want to ask you about your experience within Sale. When did you join, what were the reasons behind this choice, what is the meaning of Sale for you?* By asking them about their active participation in the collective practices, the research aimed at exploring the perceived feelings and motivations driving the people that actually compose this so-defined “alter-institution”. This therefore allows to have a deeper understanding on its meanings and scopes. Even though the three people interviewed have joined Sale Docks in different moments throughout its history, their answers were very similar in terms of the reasons behind their choice. Marco Baravalle was the first – of the three people interviewed – to become a member of Sale. Having participated actively to the occupation of the space, he has been one of the original members who actually founded the collective, and therefore, today, “the only survivor” of the original group formed in 2007. His answer, therefore, provides a very relevant testimony of the existential reasons, that were at the basis of the genesis of the space. Concerning the reasons behind the occupation of the *Magazzini del Sale* and the consequent foundation of the collective, he explains that most members of the original group of “occupiers” were already actively engaged in the political realm of the centri sociali of the area, and thus that the action of the occupation was a natural decision for them. Later, they soon realized that a majority of the group members were either art students or precarious cultural workers, or somehow employed within the world of contemporary art, which at that time (2004, 2005, 2006) was quickly developing. In particular way, the sector of cultural production within the city of Venice was experiencing a period of strong growth. For example, the IUAV University had just created a new bachelor program in Visual Arts, a faculty that was very innovative at the time because it reflected the

Anglo–Saxon model: with a few academic professors and instead many professionals (artists, curators) as lecturers. Moreover, the Biennale was booming in terms of audiences and national participations and some pioneering operations, such as those of Francois Pinault – the global luxury billionaire and collector who had bought Palazzo Grassi and then restored the historic building in Punta della Dogana – were anticipating the model that then took place some years later: i.e., global capitalists from all over the world started to invest in contemporary art and to choose Venice as the home of their private foundations. In short, it was the beginning of the dynamic process of enlargement of the contemporary art market. This was the main reason that pushed them to “initiate a political intervention in the field of contemporary art”, as they noticed that:

This “factory of cultural production”, as we called it, needed a lot of *living* labour: most of it young, trained and precarious. So, we thought that Sale could be, as it was, between more successful and less successful attempts, let's say, a centre of organization of this cultural living labour. Secondly, we realized (later, with the practice of Sale throughout the years) that it had constituted – as it still does – a non–neoliberal alternative institutional model, an alter–institutional model of cultural production.

With the term “living labour” Baravalle references a concept used in Marxist theory to refer to the productive labour performed by human individuals within capitalist production processes. Marx defines living labour as “labour-power in action”: it is the active part of labour performed by people which, combined with dead labour (including capital and means of production) allows the transformation of raw materials into commodities with exchange values (Lubin-Levy and Shvarts, 2016).

The second person interviewed is Roberta Da Soller, now a researcher specialized in the study of Performance Art and Theatre, who also joined the collective of Sale Docks in its very early stages. Her answer to this first question has made even clearer the link between the foundation of the space and the political history of those years, not only with respect to the local administration of the city of Venice, but also referring to the protests and debates concerning policy making in the cultural and educational sector in the whole country. In fact, she claims that her decision to join Sale in 2008

was mainly driven by the protests that were ongoing in that period against the so-called “Gelmini Reform”, a reform of the educational system (and specifically of the university), which was being implemented in those years and which was being hardly criticized as it was thought that it would have created more precariousness in the cultural sector. In that context of political activism, therefore, she came in touch with the reality of the Sale collective, as a student in Venice. As the space of Sale had already been opened for a few months, after the occupation, it had become a meeting spot: the place where things were organized. She mentions that during those years Sale was taking action in very close collaboration with a larger network of various political realities of the surrounding territory: the centri sociali of the north-east, Morion, the ASC (the Social Assembly for Housing), a whole series of political realities of the territory<sup>20</sup>.

Davide Giacometti, the third person interviewed, has instead become a member of Sale at a different phase of its history. In fact, he joined the collective in 2012, five years after the occupation. At that time, the use of the space in the Magazzini del Sale had been already granted and temporarily allocated to the members of the collective by the Municipality of Venice, after a period of negotiation of the agreement. However, despite this difference, it can be noticed how the reasons that Davide had illustrated to explain how he chose to actively take part in this initiative, refer to very similar starting points. First among these is the need to find a connection between political activism and one’s interest in cultural production and in the art world in general. On this point, Davide Giacometti said:

I moved to Venice 11 years ago more or less. I'm from Treviso, so before moving to Venice I was already part of various groups in that area that dealt with the political occupation of unused spaces. So, in this way, I came in contact with the reality of the centri sociali of the North East, a network also connected to Magazzini del Sale. I then moved to Venice for work and I must say that it was

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<sup>20</sup> The term centri sociali refers to self-organized, autonomous and non-for-profit institutions providing social, recreational, cultural activities. “Laboratorio Occupato Morion” is a social space active in the city since 1990, it defines itself as a “an anti-fascist, anti-racist and trans-feminist safe space”. The Social Assembly for Housing is an activist group concerned with the problem of housing accessibility in Venice.

quite natural for me, since I already knew many people that were already members of the various collectives, to get closer to the political realities of Venice. Then, since I had a vaguely artistic background – I was editing videos at the time – it was automatic for me to pursue an activist and also somewhat artistic path, and it was in this way that I became interested in the reality of Sale.

Some common points can be found with respect to the other two interviews: specifically, the closeness of Sale in its original form to a tradition and history of political engagement. Originating from a network of other political spaces within the surrounding territory, for many members, Sale signifies a subsequent phase in their path of activism, providing a space that enables them to inextricably integrate their political commitment within a discourse on art and cultural production. On this concern, when asked about the meaning that they attribute to their experience within Sale, Baravalle has responded:

What does it mean to me to be part of Sale? For me it means almost everything, in the sense that it is not a voluntary activity that I do in addition to, let's say, my recognised professional activity. Through Sale I have formed everything that is my point of view on art, politics, etc.; I have learned to look at the art world – and I use the expression “art world” not by chance, because acting in Venice immediately includes you in a global, international city as far as art is concerned. So, I have learnt to look at what art is today, what the institutional space of art is, how art works today, using Sale as a lens. [...] It is also a space, I believe, that has been able to look beyond itself, that is, it has somehow managed not to reproduce existing models: it acts within a network of social centres, but it is not a social centre. It has a curatorial programme, but it is not a non-profit art space. It is an attempt to intertwine these two dimensions in unprecedented ways.

This theme of a lens through which art production, in Venice and beyond, was observed, is recurrent also in the interview of Davide Giacometti. He in fact explains how, for him, his experience as a member of Sale has represented “a good way to gain a different perspective and orient myself within the cultural institutions where I was also starting to work at the time”. Acting as a sort of centre for experimentation, it thus stimulated in him the necessity to investigate whether there could actually be other

ways of producing art – more sustainable and in line with the needs of the city and citizens.

The second question aimed at exploring the way in which these practices come to be. *What is your role and how are roles distributed and organized among the members of Sale?* This was asked in order to understand how are things organized, roles divided, decisions made, within alter-institutions.

Also in this case, the three collected responses have touched upon several shared aspects or common points. First of all, the decision-making process of what happens at Sale Docks, and how, has not changed during the years: there is an assembly made up of the people who are active members of the collective, more or less permanently. The Assembly, functions as a democratic body that, throughout regular meetings, makes decisions regarding the implementation of specific projects or campaigns, selects collaborators, and outlines the approach to be taken in carrying out these endeavours. On this point, some criticalities have emerged. Because there hasn't been much turnover of members during the years, the number of people composing the Assembly has very much fluctuated since its foundation, progressively decreasing with time. If during its first years of activity, the Assembly was constituted by more than twenty, even up to almost thirty people, now the numbers have shrunk to less than ten. The Assembly does not have a fixed number of members since its composition consists of more and less permanently active people, which participate according to their availabilities. As explained by the people interviewed, there are some long-standing members who due to life or age-related reasons, have distanced themselves from the more "internal" dynamic of the Assembly, though still remaining supportive and continuing to provide their help when needed, in an activist capacity.

Conversely, the interviews have highlighted some positive aspects of the core group remaining largely unchanged since its early years of activity. For example, this continuity implies faster decision-making processes, as there is a specifically defined line of action. Moreover, this has contributed to the cultivation of an external credibility and accountability of the projects carried out, allowing also the creation and maintenance of a reliable external network of reference, which facilitates collaboration. In theory, there is no explicit and official division of labour. However, in practice, some roles have naturally been informally emerged: mostly based on

individual expertise and background. On this concern, the variety of diverse expertise among Sale Docks members has provided a solid foundation for two key reasons.

Firstly, it enables the consideration of various sector of art production from a number of different perspectives: thus, allowing for a deeper understanding of the many existing realities falling within the definition of cultural work. Secondly, the range of specialties within the collective has facilitated the internal production of numerous projects over the years. This was achieved by bringing together the diverse skills and expertise of its members for the benefit of the common good.

For example, among the people interviewed in this context, Marco Baravalle has a more “curatorial” role, and has been defined by Davide Giacometti as the “spokesperson” of the collective. Roberta Da Soller, instead, shares her knowledge on theatre, performing arts, and performance studies: i.e., the subjects she deals with in her professional career. Davide Giacometti has a slightly more practical, technical background; therefore, he often deals with the more organizational mansions, including the set-ups and technical installations.

Once clarified the meanings and scope of Sale as an active practice (through investigating the motivations and intentions of its members) and having thus understood how things are carried out within this alter-institutional context, the interview went on, trying to analyse at a deeper level the inevitable relationship that exists between Sale, as an alter-institution, and the official institutional cultural context: both within the city of Venice and beyond its borders. Considering the location of Sale Docks, in fact, from a spatial point of view, the inevitable relation of coexistence between these two “models” is particularly evident. The space where Sale is located is, in fact, surrounded by a number of internationally known art institutions (including, among the most important: the Pinault Collection at Punta della Dogana, Fondazione Vedova and Gallerie dell’Accademia), together with various other smaller galleries and art spaces. In general, the situation of the art sector in Venice is very much institutionalized, with bigger and smaller institutions. This is especially clear as a result of various events related to the Biennale, which exert an attractive influence, essentially centralizing cultural activities within the city. The respondents were then asked to focus on these points, and consequently, to *explain what is their view on what*

*should be the relationship between alter-institutional actors, such as Sale in this case, and the institutionalized art world.*

The received answers, highlight the complexity of the matter, bringing to light the existence of a twofold situation. On the one hand, the attitude towards the institutions acting within the city of Venice is – for the most part – very critical. In his interview, Marco Baravalle has argued that from their collective point of view, no art institution in Venice, has demonstrated the will to detach from a completely neo-liberal model of production, and thus, for this reason, the relations between them and Sale Docks have, in the majority of cases, been critical. Some of the main points against which they protest, for example, include the large use by official institutional actors of outsourced labour, which they see as a strategy to make work precarious. Moreover, they mobilize against the various forms of workers exploitation addressing issues such as below-minimum wage payments and the utilization of contracts outside the standard cultural sector agreement, represented by the “Federculture” contract. He has reported some examples of mobilization actions they have carried out, as an activist collective, to protest against such actions implemented by some cultural institutions of the city. These examples provide a clear view of the main political issues on which the collective focuses its practice.

In 2015, for instance, they decided to occupy the Peggy Guggenheim Museum’s terrace facing the Grand Canal to protest against the exploitation of migrant labourers from South East Asia during the construction of the foundation’s Abu Dhabi branch.



*Figure 9: Gulf Labor protesters outside the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice on May 8, 2015.*

Additionally, they also have a critical position against the legitimization of controversial political figures that increasingly try to enter the contemporary art market, not only to increase their profits but also to “clean” their reputation: the so-called “toxic philanthropy”. This concept refers to the acceptance of donations or funding from individuals or corporations whose wealth is derived from unethical or harmful practices. One action performed by Sale Docks to shed light on this issue concerned Leonid Michel’son, founder and owner of the VAC Foundation, a Russian gas oligarch very close to the Russian oppressive and reactionary government. The occupation was aimed at initiating a discussion on this matter, so that it doesn’t end up in “white washing”: a situation in which unethical behaviour is normalized. This moreover highlights the strong existing connections between museums (and the members of their boards) and political matters, once again demonstrating their impossibility of being neutral institutions. Moreover, Baravalle explains that another focus of the collective has been denouncing the fact that, no matter how radical the artistic content of an exhibitions held in Venice may seem, in almost all cases these exhibitions are above all an opportunity to replenish the city's real estate revenues. In this neoliberal model, in fact, most exhibitions and art events are organized by foreign patrons, which, not owning a permanent space in the city, must pay increasingly high rents in order to secure a location. This mechanism, according to Marco Baravalle, generates a multimillionaire business, in which, net of the radical nature of the content of the exhibitions and initiatives, the surplus generated is not then invested in projects for the city's cultural development, but remains in the pockets of Venice's property owners. In this context, therefore: “art is more synonymous with income than with cultural development or social development of the city, as instead it should be. And these are just some of the reasons why we have a rather critical relationship with the other institutions of the city”.

However, all the respondents agree that they are not ideologically opposed to working in collaboration with institutions. Consequently, they have actually engaged in a number of collaborative practices and initiatives with official cultural institutions (mostly abroad) that have demonstrated particular interest in subverting and rethinking their role, taking inspiration from Sale’s alternative stance. This is coherent with what



Roberta Da Soller has stated in her interview: “we are always opened to collaborating with institution that demonstrate the capacity and will to critically analyse their role within the social context”, i.e., institutions that question themselves about their own structure, about how to integrate “marginal voices” and other diverse experiences that were traditionally excluded from the structured notion of institutionality. The practices carried out by Sale Docks, she explains, start from the fact that, in their view, the institution – drawing from the Deleuzian point of view of Instincts and Institutions – constitutes the fallout of social desire. According to Deleuze (1953), in fact, an institution essentially represents a “process of satisfaction”, an artificial tool, elaborated by people through the creation of so-called “original worlds” aimed at mediating between individual “tendencies” and the external environment. If, therefore, on the one hand “instincts” can be directly satisfied through interacting with the external environment, on the other, institutions are created in situations where the immediate satisfaction of a need isn't possible within the external context. Individuals thus devise artificial superstructures that serve as intermediaries enabling them to fulfil their inclinations. However, because the act of establishing these so-called “original worlds” is continuous and in ongoing transformation, the very nature of the tendency itself is constantly muted from its original state. Consequently, the institution should not be immobile and closed in itself. But, on the contrary, both from a practical and also theoretical point of view, it should be a porous entity —one that should somehow reflect the desires of a society. She further states:

The institution should not be similar to the institution itself, but instead, it tends to repeat itself, to always say the same things to itself, to also produce subjects that in some way confirm it as a closed institutional body and so on. And so, we start from here, we start from the criticism, that is, we criticize how the contemporary institution has taken forms that do not belong to it.

There are, however, some cases in which institutions are opened to rethinking themselves. In the last few years Sale Docks has started collaborating, for example, with the IUAV University, mostly within the realm of performance art and theatre studies, also thanks to the relationship of complicity, due to a shared history of political militancy, that some of the members of Sale have with some professors and researchers

working for the university. On this matter, Roberta Da Soller has shared a very interesting reflection on the meaning behind this alter–institutional partnership with the university, acknowledging its fundamental role as an institution that crucially contributes to the production of culture in societies. On this matter, she said:

We must highlight what the university can do: how a certain type of knowledge can also lead to a certain type of doing. In my opinion this is important to say how institutions should work, and how the creation and cultivation of knowledge should work. A knowledge precisely that produces a doing, not so much a still knowledge.

This statement sheds light on the main concept that emerges from these three interviews, emphasizing the fundamental understanding of what it means to act within and according to alter–institutional models. In this context, not only theory and practice cannot be disregarded from one another, but they mutually reinforce and stimulate each other.

Outside of the cultural panorama of Venice, it has been easier for Sale Docks to participate in a number of initiatives in collaboration with a variety of art institutions motivated and opened to questioning themselves and their traditionally hegemonic structures. Some of the collaborations cited during the interviews included, for example, the Sant'Arcangelo Festival<sup>21</sup>, in particular during the years in which Eva Neklyeva (2017–2019) was the director. In that occasion, Sale Docks was invited to take part to several editions of the festival (together with other representatives of cultural occupied spaces, including for example Macao) to open up a discourse on *other* institutionality. During that time, in fact, the Festival was actively examining its own structure and exploring ways to incorporate new and alternative experiences into its program.

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<sup>21</sup> Santarcangelo Festival, is an Italian festival dedicated to contemporary theatre, dance and performative arts. Being founded in 1971, it is one of the oldest as well as long-lasting festivals in the country. From 2017 to 2019 the artistic direction of the festival was entrusted to the Belarus-born, Finnish curator Eva Neklyeva. During her mandate, the aim was to reinforce the existing ties between the Festival and the local territory, together with an effort to open the event to a wider audience. In this context, some of the main concepts discussed included the body as a political tool, the creation and establishment of a temporary community, and the exploration of the reality of the festival as a captivating experience.

Another fruitful collaboration that has been cited by all of the interviewed members of Sale Docks, in the one implemented together with the museums affiliated with “L’Internationale” confederation. This represents a significant example in that it shows how it can be possible, also for traditional institution that have a history of hegemonic perpetuation of power structures within society, to deconstruct their role and reconstruct a new institutionality, based on new, different believes and notions. This group, which takes its name from an international anthem that has been adopted by various historical labour political movements calling for a democratic and equitable society, brings together seven major European art institutions, as well as a number of complementary partners taking action in the academic and artistic field. The aim is to create a platform, capable of promoting, through the practices of cultural institutions, values of difference and antagonism, solidarity and commonality, starting from the belief that art can act as a catalyst for the discussion of a renewed social contract.

L’Internationale, in fact, sustains that art institutions must take action in order to question and challenge their own specific systems, as well as the formal structures constituting institutionality in general. Representing therefore a new internationalist model for art production and promotion, that challenges traditional notions of exclusiveness, closure and property, it advocates for a common heritage based on interconnectedness and a shared sense of urgency with regards to certain issues. In order to explore the eventual challenges that alter–institutions may have to deal with, (and consequently understand their strengths in overcoming them), this research compares the history of Sale Docks with that of the other similar spaces: also founded after cultural occupations and engaging in alternative practices of cultural production.

The objective is to examine the reasons behind the longevity of Sale Docks in comparison to other experiences, many of which have been operative for shorter periods of time and are now no longer active. The investigation aims to understand whether the reasons for Sale Docks' longevity lie in peculiar aspects of its practices and models of action or are instead influenced by specific characteristics of the city of Venice. The specific question posed to the interviewed respondents was: *compared to other similar experiences (I am referring to Macao for example or Teatro Valle Occupato), Sale is the only one still surviving. Why do you think that is the case? Do you think that there is something peculiar about the city of Venice? Or Sale?*

The answers received are, once again, very coherent. All of the respondents agreed on one main reason that can be considered as a valid explanation of this difference in the duration of Sale's activity with respect to the other similar experiences, which is: being part of a larger network of organizations. "Sale Docks is not alone", has explained Marco Baravalle in his interview, as it has always managed to maintain a strong link with the other activist social spaces of the city, and of the whole surrounding territory. This plurality of voices, taking action together and supporting each, has led to a multiplication of forces, thus generating an interest in Sale's activities beyond the individuals who are directly part of the Sale Docks collective as members. This aspect has been crucial for safeguarding the space against potential forced eviction actions by the local administration (as it has happened in other occupied spaces). In this specific context, the deterrent has been the recognition by public forces of the existence of this extensive network capable of mobilizing people from all over Veneto and Trentino to defend the Sale Docks space. This response can be employed as supporting evidence for the argument that was made earlier, emphasizing the importance for alter-institutions to adopt a rooted approach. Indeed, it can serve as a practical example of how contributing to the creation of communities is crucial for their survival and for the effectiveness of their actions. Moreover, this also aligns with their objective, enabling them to act within and for the common. This, in fact, has allowed the members of the collective, as highlighted by Davide Giacometti in his interview, to maintain a practical perspective on the results achieved as a consequence of their activities. Maintaining close contact with other social realities addressing the problems and needs of the city from various perspectives has provided a continuous flow of feedback. This interaction sheds light on issues that the art world, even at a more institutional level, often addresses superficially without thorough self-examination. Having such a close social fabric, instead, has been extremely beneficial, not in terms of support but also to keep them informed and prevent them to detach from what was actually happening in their city.

A second explanation on this concern, discussed by Marco Baravalle, refers to the strong link that the agency of the collective has maintained with its own history. He argues that Sale Docks has been capable, throughout the years, of preserving its own clear identity, whereas some of the other mentioned experiences have, in a very

innovative but also potentially dangerous way, rather “focused their attention on the use of the space”. This might have made it harder, in some cases, for external audiences, to immediately grasp the reasons and meanings guiding the activity of these spaces. In the words of Baravalle:

They have organised the regulation of their spaces by focusing mainly on use: so different subjects, different collectives, different groups, all using a certain space. Which, if you like, is a very innovative model, it's a democratic model, it's an interesting model, but it's a model that in the long run can be dispersive and might cause some internal tensions, and thus it may somehow obscure the main purpose and missions of the space. Sale Docks, instead, has always been organized through the Assembly, which has always tried to give the space a certain, clear political direction, referring back to a specific history that has its own identity. This history has its roots in the 1970s, in the history of the Italian autonomous movements, etc. From there, maybe, from that history, we may pull back some limits, but that history also gives us a big... a big strength.

The radical political tradition Baravalle here refers to has its roots in the so-called “extra-parliamentary groups” of the Italian left that began to form and take action during the 1970s. These grassroots political movements constituted around the rejection of traditional established political systems. They were in fact autonomous from other political organizations and sustained the engagement of practices of direct action. This sheds light on and clarifies more in depth the position of the Sale Docks collective and its methodologies of action taking. The space, therefore, is very much politicized. This characteristic, as supported by Baravalle, can constitute a strength in that it provides a clear definition of the identity of the group, clarifying its purposes and principles.

However, there is a risk that this strong political identity may become a limiting condition, preventing evolution and transformation. One could in fact read in the same way Sale's strong proximity and its participation in a network of equally –if not more – politically defined realities, with a strong history of direct radical activism behind them. Certainly, this support provides a sense of legitimacy and protection against external criticism or attacks. At the same time, however, it may also hinder the group's ability to evolve and adapt to changing circumstances and address contemporary

problems and needs. Furthermore, there may be a tendency towards self-reaffirmation, rather than a focus on ongoing self-examination and renewal. A potential consequence of this delicate balance may be seen in the fact that, in recent years, the collective has struggled to renew itself in terms of participants (especially in terms of a more continuous participation, i.e., among the members of the Assembly). As it has already been pointed out above in relation to official institutions, in order to remain relevant and effective as an alter-institutional force capable of generating possible alternatives, the group must be willing to subject itself to continuous processes of discussion and revision of its identity and practices. This requires a commitment to self-critique and openness to new ideas and perspectives.

The fifth and final question of the interview centred around exploring the perspectives of Sale Docks' members regarding the role of cultural institutions in today's contemporary society. The question posed was: *what do you think about the role that the contemporary institutionalized art world plays in addressing the pressing global political issues it is often asked to engage with?* Here, the answers received have highlighted many different points, offering the chance to initiate a variety of reflections from many perspectives. Davide Giacometti has provided a practical testimony of how institutions operate in this context, primarily focusing on specific examples from the cultural landscape of Venice:

In Venice there is a great paradox from this point of view: because the world of artistic and cultural production, which generates huge economic surplus (representing perhaps the city's most important economy), cannot, or rather does not want to, create a valid support system for workers. In other words, it is a market completely based on the precariousness of labour, bordering on legality. We saw it with the advent of Covid-19, when half the people employed in that sector had to leave Venice, because there was no job security. In that context, the problem became even more evident, but even before that, and even now that we are no longer in an emergency, the situation is still the same.

This discourse is discussed in depth by Leigh Clair La Berge in her work “Wages Against Artwork: Decommodified Labor and the Claims of Socially Engaged Arts” (2019). In the second chapter of the book, the author reports and comments on the

initiative promoted by the artist-run institution BFAMFA PhD founded in 2012 with the aim of engaging in art practices to advocate for cultural equity in the United States: “Artists Report Back” (2014). This consists of an investigation carried out directly with a number of professional artists to analyse and explore the economic sustainability of their work. According to La Berge, one of the most relevant findings of the report is the claim according to which: out of over 1 million arts graduates in the United States, only 8 percent of them manage to sustain themselves financially through their art. This data shed light on the fact that the problem of “decommodified labour” – as La Berge calls it in her book to indicate the “slow diminishment of the wage alongside an increase in the demands of work” (2019, p. ix) – is in general a characteristic of the world of art production. However, Giacometti highlights that in Venice this issue is made even more evident by the fact that the sector of cultural production is one of the most important within the economy of the city. Therefore, the paradox of a growing demand for art events juxtaposed with the progressive deterioration of worker’s rights and worsening of their conditions in this sector is even more pronounced.

Moreover, as Giacometti goes on, another interesting reflection is made within this context. He states: “The problem is worsened by the fact that the institutions create a system aimed at isolating the workers, which we have tried to contrast with the project “Biennalocene””. The condition of isolation in which cultural workers often find themselves generates a feeling of impotence, completely defusing any potential attempt of contrast. On this matter, alter-institutional practices are effective in generating new alternative potentialities in that they provide the space required for the creation of a collective identity and, therefore, to visualise and take action into a shared struggle.

Consequently, another relevant topic is discussed:

Another theme is that the institution very often conveys messages that it does not really put into practice: take the example of sustainability. Art Institutions always declare to be sustainable because they have to, in order to maintain their reputation since there is a lot of attention towards environmental sustainability now, but obviously, in practice, they are not. And in this regard, it is also difficult from the outside to deal with these problems: there have been realities that have

for example tried to promote and organize the reuse of waste materials, but at this point, everything that could be done has been done, and there is so much surplus, so much production of things, that it becomes impossible to manage, unless the institution itself coordinates it from the inside in a centralized way.

This perspective, therefore, sustains that art institutions (mainly focusing on Venice) are not actively invested in tackling global issues, even if they may appear to superficially express concern. This can be linked to the discourse explained in the previous chapter regarding the depoliticizing power that institutions have when engaging in the mere role of acting as neutral containers of radical art objects. Moreover, the discourse on labour and workers' rights further provides support for the view that institutions do not actually engage and take part to fights concerning urgent global issues such as (in this case), that of unemployment and poverty and workers' rights.

Marco Baravalle, has provided a more theoretical answer, focusing on two main points. First, he argues: "One can perhaps look at the institutional space, the institutional circuit of art, of visual art, as a space in which a contest between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic tensions is played out. This helps us to see this space neither as totally, shall we say, oppressive, negative, uninhabitable, nor as the safe, secure or "freedom of expression" zone as some would like to present it". This approach, consisting in looking at cultural organization in terms of hegemonic and counterhegemonic drives, allows to conceive the possibility of witnessing simultaneously some art institutions as places of political propaganda, and others as active players in the fight against the perpetuation of supremacist unequal structures of power.

Here, the concept of "hegemony" is not exactly used in its original Gramscian meaning. The theory of hegemony developed by Antonio Gramsci, in fact, refers to an unstable balance between social forces struggling for dominance. This theoretical context, therefore, aims to explain how the dominant beliefs constituting the status quo of a society are not (as they may appear) natural and inevitable, but instead artificially constructed through social agreements. The term "hegemony" is thus used to denote the power relationship between competing forces. In his answer, instead, Marco Baravalle refers to the concepts explored by Oliver Markart in his publication



“Hegemony Machines: documenta X to fifteen and the Politics of Biennialization” (2022).

In this essay, the author understands art institutions, and in particular biennials and large-scale art exhibitions, as “giant ideology machines, or, more aptly, hegemony machines of the civil, national, occidental, or Europeanist dominant culture” (p. 10).

These institutions are thus perceived as potential “hegemonic” actors as they possess the power to reproduce dominant values and beliefs. However, the author argues that, because hegemony itself is defined by the struggle for power of contrasting forces, these institutions on the other hand may also represent a “battleground”, where dominant culture is vulnerably exposed to potential attacks. In this sense, therefore, the institutional art space can be looked at as a context in which hegemonic and counter-hegemonic tensions are played out, as stated by Baravalle. In his essay, Markart provides a comparative analysis of the last six editions of documenta. He argues that each of these editions can be characterized as performing either a hegemonic or counter-hegemonic role. He considers “counter-hegemonic” the editions that have intensified their politicization – providing a central stage to analytical-political art practices, took action towards the decentring of the West, promoted an uncompromising theorization consisting in the stimulation of in-depth reflections on the relations between art and institutional theory, and a targeted emphasis on education and the pedagogical role of cultural events.

Drawing from this example therefore Baravalle explains that the first group (i.e., consisting of the so-defined “hegemonic” actors) includes institutions characterized by an oppressive presence of power, where ideals potentially deviating from the dominant status-quo may be subjected to instances of censorship. Moreover, he claims that these institutions may act as capturing devices, i.e., depoliticizing radical contents into mere buzzwords, totally annulling their potential for social subversion, and basically turning them into niche material goods. While, in the second case (“counter-hegemonic” ones), these institutions act as activist organisations that take part in the fight for their own decolonization and take effort in order to achieve the abolition of all the power structures proper of the neoliberal model, which has characterized the majority of cultural institutions up to today.

In advancing this discourse, as a secondary point, he underscores the importance of maintaining constant awareness of abolitionist tensions when discussing counter-hegemonic institutions. In this sense, contemporary attempts in this direction are to be acknowledged as originating from entirely different premises compared to the protests characterizing the reformist movements of institutional critique (described in the first chapter) in the 1960s and 1970s. During that period, the focus was not on abolishing the institution but rather on asking for more structural reforms, that could improve its positioning with respect to a variety of salient issues, such as the representation of minority groups within in positions of power. In that context, thus, the museum was still envisioned as an inhabitable space that needed to be reclaimed and reformed.

Today, however, this is deemed insufficient: the neo-liberal institution must be completely abolished to pave the way for the construction of something entirely new in its place. This historical paradigm can be explained by reporting some examples that serve as significant illustrations of these two distinct approaches. On the one hand, the action undertaken in 1969 by the Art Workers Coalition at the MoMA, where a group of artists/activists, presented a list of demands to the Museum aimed to address various issues, including the lack of diversity in the exhibitions and staff, demonstrates the willingness to reform and improve the institution, without however questioning its structural existence. On the other hand, instead, in more recent years, a number of actions have been carried out by many activist collectives, specifically targeting the foundations on which institutions as such are built.

For example, the US based group “Decolonize This Place”, has carried out a series of protests against the MoMA, by targeting some members of its board of trustees for a number of reasons: including existing financial and political links to the detention of migrants at the US-Mexico border, the production of weapons and their circulation within ongoing conflicts around the world, together with, for instance, their connections with the “#metoo” movement. Despite the existing differences in tactics employed, aesthetics, and political horizons, these actions are all characterized by a strong abolitionist tension, contrary to the reformist struggles carried out by the activists taking part to the first two phases of institutional critique. In these latter cases, therefore, the museum is not anymore seen as a habitable space, needing to be

reclaimed. Instead, it is seen as something that must be abolished in order to make space for the construction of something alternative. On this matter, Baravalle explains:

The term abolition, the notions of so-called abolitionism, come from the tradition of anti-slavery struggles in the United States: hence the need to abolish slavery. This category of abolition aims to tell us two things. One, that there are certain institutions, like slavery once was, cannot be reformed, they must be abolished. In place of these institutions that at the time and still in other forms today convey and support the resistance of white supremacy, abolitionists say, something new must be created, and we return circularly to the theme of *alter-institutions*, that is, different, new institutions. Decolonisation activists in the United States have transported this discourse from institutions such as the prisons system or the police to institutions such as museums. Why? Because they believe that museums today are no longer reformable, because they are direct expressions of what they call toxic philanthropy, i.e. they act as instruments of “art washing”, where art is used to restore a certain reputation to the people sitting on the boards of trustees of museums that are inextricably linked to unacceptable businesses that draw back to colonialism, gender oppression, migrant oppression, prison business, etc. etc.

However, as stated by the MTL collective in the essay “From institutional Critique to institutional Liberation? A Decolonial Perspective on the Crises of Contemporary Art” (2018), these practices must be: “grounded in the practice of living, encompassing both daily acts of resistance, refusal, and sabotage, on the one hand, and economies of love, care, and mutual aid on the other” (p. 197). This implies that abolition and destruction do not mark the final point of these actions; rather, they signify the initial phase of a more extensive and intricate process. The final aim, in fact, is the realization of new futurities starting from the total liberation of people and places from oppressive power hierarchies. In conclusion, the perspectives shared in the interview shed light on the complex relationship between contemporary art institutions and their role in addressing pressing global political issues. The answers received reveal a nuanced although convergent spectrum of perspectives, ranging from the critique of institutions perpetuating inequalities to the advocacy for their radical transformation.

The evidence gathered through these in-depth interviews conducted with three members of the Sale Docks collective offer a privileged perspective on the activities and operations of alter-institutions. Moreover, they shed light on their role and position within the contemporary society, clarifying their objectives and accounting for their relationship with the external institutional environment. The results obtained and the qualitative data gathered in this investigation are, of course, far from being exhaustive. However, they aim to provide a useful starting point for potential future research on the roles that alter-institutional actors and practices can play in the ever-evolving relationship between art production and politics at the institutional level.

Going back to the research question which was the starting point of this analysis, i.e.: can the inefficiency of the art world in proposing new political alternatives to pressing global issues be attributed to its structural institutionalization? And thus, can “alter institutions” be considered a potential solution to this issue? In analysing the data gathered from the interviews with privileged witnesses, namely active members of Sale Docks some common point can be found with respect to the theory analysed and explained in depth in the first two chapters. Thus, a compelling case emerges, suggesting that it could be reasonable to think that the incapacity of art institutions to actively address and engage in real debates on pressing global issues could be attributed to their systemic structural institutionalization. The entrenched tradition and historical ties to hegemonic power, colonialism, toxic philanthropy, and a profit-centric neoliberal model explored and discussed appear to constrain these institutions, preventing them from providing meaningful solutions. Contrastingly, the initiatives undertaken by Sale Docks, and in particular the collaborations implemented with other institutions, highlight the crucial role that alter-institutions play in this sense. Positioned at the margin, they are in fact capable of looking “from the outside in and from the inside out” (hooks, 1984). This dual perspective seems to grant them a comprehensive understanding that enables the envisioning of alternatives and the creation of spaces of freedom, where conventional institutional structures can be completely abolished and reimagined. The collaborative efforts of Sale Docks demonstrate that alter-institutions have the potential to catalyse transformative shifts,

inspiring other institutions worldwide to rethink their approaches and actively contribute to addressing the complex challenges of our time.

# CONCLUSIONS

This thesis aims to explore the role of cultural institutions as agents moving within a complex, dynamic and political society. In order to do so, the work is centred around the comparison between the traditional, official institutional model – referred to as “neoliberal”, which has its roots in the “white cube theory”, celebrating the neutrality of art with respect to any external matter – and what is instead defined in this thesis as the “alter-institutional” model. Taking a cultural-studies perspective, this model is built upon the idea that, within this context, neutrality is an illusion; thus assuming that institutions are naturally and by definition necessarily biased, since all actions and practices carried out within them are bearers and revealers of narratives that can confirm or overturn the norms and values maintaining the status quo of society. As a consequence, cultural “alter-institutions” conceive themselves as potential catalysts for the production of new alternative realities. They therefore aim to constitute a space that can stimulate a debate on the contradictions of the contemporary world, attempting to provide innovative solutions to the most pressing issues faced, by adopting an intersectional position. In this way, institutions can become promoters of alternative messages, respecting their role as generators of new ideas and realities. According to the alter-institutional tradition, however, this can only be achieved through a complete disruption of the traditional neo-liberal institutional model. In this thesis, this debate is embedded and analysed within bell hooks' discourse on marginality. Following her theoretical thought, therefore, on the one hand “traditional” cultural institutions are understood as “central” actors and, on the other, alter-institutions are instead to be read as marginal. According to bell hooks, those at the “centre” of society tend to have a limited perspective due to their privileged position, which prevents them from seeing beyond their own experiences. This idea, rooted in the Gramscian concept of hegemony, suggests that values which are passed off as the “norm” in society can be easily accepted as natural and unchangeable. Consequently, those in the centre, which do not have to contend with the inequalities and oppression stemming from societal power hierarchies, often conform to the status quo, either out of blindness to alternatives or for the sake of maintaining their privileged status.

This thesis thus aims to transfer this discourse and apply it to the dichotomy between structured institutions acting within the centre of the art world, and alter-institutions defined as agents taking action from the margins. According to bell hooks, in fact, only by assuming a marginal position, it is possible to initiate a transformative process capable of generating alternative models of action and thus putting into practice solutions that can overturn the status quo of society for the common benefit of all. The idea is to generate alternative solutions to the most pressing problems of our time, by taking an intersectional perspective which therefore implies the abolition of all existing forms of oppression and power inequalities. Marginalized perspectives offer a unique global insight. In fact, their view is not limited to the space that they inhabit – the margin, as they are continuously forced to come in touch with the rules and norms of the centre, which define and regulate all societal relations. This awareness is only possible within this space of opposition, thus allowing for the emergence of radical possibilities. This margin becomes the fertile ground for the creation of alternative institutional models, driven by a commitment to evolving alongside society's needs. Such institutions understand that their societal role necessitates ongoing self-interrogation and adaptation.

In this context, the first chapter first explores the concept of institution, from a theoretical perspective, through a comparative analysis of how it has been studied from a sociological point of view, with the aim of giving an overview of the answers that have been given to the question “why do societies need to create institutions?”. A particular focus is of course reserved to the analysis of institutions dealing with cultural production. In the second and third part, the chapter then delve into a historical examination of the evolution of the practices included within the concept of “institutional critique”, from which the concept of alter-institutionality has originated. This analysis explores the historical, theoretical and cultural reasons that led to the definition of three phases of this practice: the first in the 1960s/70s, the second in the 1980s/90s and the third, which has taken hold in recent years, characterized by the discussion on the role and impact of cultural institutions beyond the boundaries of the art world.

The second chapter is dedicated specifically to exploring the notion of “alter-institutionality”. The initial section of the chapter seeks to provide a clear definition of

this concept by engaging in a comprehensive review and discussion of the various perspectives surrounding the role of cultural institutions and their relation with society at large. It offers a historical and theoretical examination of the evolution of this discourse, beginning with the affirmation of the idea of the “white cube” in the 1930s, up to the present day, where the focus of debate has shifted and is now characterized by growing external pressures urging the art world towards greater involvement in political matters. The subsequent section of the chapter delves into an analysis of the concept of “alter-institution” within the framework of bell hooks' work on the margins. Finally, the third chapter represents an attempt to validate, with a practical example, the hypotheses developed through the review of the literature discussed in the previous chapters regarding the potentialities of the alter-institutional model as a viable alternative to the conventional institutional framework, which is therefore considered incapable of fulfilling its imaginative function, stagnant in its tradition and complicit in the perpetuation of the status quo. This is pursued through the analysis of a case study: the Sale Docks collective in Venice. The collective is therefore analysed as an example of an “alter-institutional” reality. The examination provides a description of the process that led to the foundation of the space, its models of action and practices carried out over the years, and its ideological positions around the broad institutional discourse. This analysis is carried out in constant comparison with the established norms characterizing the mainstream art world and its institutional landscape. Furthermore, the city of Venice is discussed as a peculiar case in which this contrast is particularly evident. The final section of the chapter includes extracts from the interviews conducted with the members of Sale Docks throughout this study to provide comprehensive insights, thus featuring perspectives from three privileged witnesses. The data collected through the interviews, although informative, are not exhaustive and therefore do not offer provide sufficient evidence to allow us to draw any definitive conclusions about the effectiveness of the collective's practices in opposing the institutional model and proposing more virtuous alternatives to it.

However, it is worth noting that they provide a clear overview of how the theoretical model described in detail in the preceding chapters, manifests in real-life practice. In addition, they offer stimulating questions that could be interesting starting points for potential future research.



Given the sociological nature of this study, it does not directly address the specifics of potential with strategies of cultural policies implementation. However, aiming to provide a theoretical starting point for rethinking the role of cultural institutions and their relationship with society, it could represent a valid starting point, stimulating the initiation of a further discussion on concrete measures that could be implemented in practice, leading to possible structural transformations.

This research seeks to stimulate a discussion on the complex, yet pivotal urgency of defining the role of cultural institutions in an ever-changing contemporary context, subject to a number of pressing issues. The findings resulting from both the theoretical analysis and the practical examination, carried out through the exploration of Sale Docks as a case study, appear to support one another and collectively demonstrate that the neoliberal model of cultural production, still tied to the idea and tradition of art neutrality, presents a number of problems, frequently serving as a perpetuator for hegemonic discourses supporting the existing status quo. On the basis of the theories analysed and of the data collected, it therefore seems reasonable to attribute the stagnation of most actors within the mainstream world of cultural production to their entrenched position of centrality, as defined by bell hooks. This stasis seems to stem from their structural institutionalisation, which remains intrinsically tied to a very present and immobilising tradition.

Consequently, it is also reasonable to argue that the alter-institutional model, taking action from the margins of this realm and thus exercising its practices from a space which is free from its limiting norms, holds the potential of embodying a new, radical and oppositional model, capable of opening up unexplored horizons and thus producing effective alternative solutions to the urgent problems of the contemporary world.

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