Institutional critique, as it will be understood here, was a child of 1968, but a child with a deep-rooted soul often at odds with the spirit of its time. If there was one trait that characterized that spirit above all others, it was its suspicion of institutions as such, casting itself variously against Jim Crow, the military-industrial complex, patriarchy, the Man, and a host of other such perceived and actual hegemons. Because of this suspicion, little in the way of opposing, counterhegemonic institutional forms emerged except in the most amorphous sense of “the Movement,” in the more desperate (and generally later) fringe forms of the terrorist cell and armed militia, or in the increasingly self-marginalizing manner of the
identity-based advocacy group. As the relatively sober and localized indignation of groups like Students for a Democratic Society or the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in the early and mid-1960s dissipated into the free-floating and increasingly global ecstasy and rage of 1968, no party or clearly defined movement leadership came to take their place, nor was there generally a desire for one. It is commonplace to assume institutions to be “the rules of the game in a society or, more formally, . . . the humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction,” as one writer has put it; but the institutions born of 1968, if they can even be given that label, rarely admitted to such authority. This is the single most fundamental difference between the new left and the old: by the end of the 1960s, institutionality, or identification with a set of rules that governed social interaction, was itself broadly understood to be an ideological form of social participation left over from the past and not an integral part of the new cultural ideals or a fundamental organizing principle for social change. The geopolitics of this period institutional thinking was further complicated by the cold war, as we will see below, and as such it does not turn out to be quite so homogeneous as this, but overall we can speak of a general tendance Groucho governing the conditions of formation for the art practice that would later come to be called institutional critique.

We will turn to the cold war complications in the second part of this essay, but for now we can take the following after-the-fact exchange between leading French soixante-huitard Daniel Cohn-Bendit and his Polish equivalent Adam Michnik as a general illustration of how this period sensibility spanned the cold war divide easily and without complication:

Daniel Cohn-Bendit: Yesterday, while we were talking, you said that you find it strange that all these people from 1968, who have different or even antagonistic political positions, feel sympathy for each other and display solidarity toward each other. Tom Hayden—who is now part of the Democratic establishment in the United States and used to be a militant in the reformist wing of the American student movement—as well as Rudi Dutschke and myself, Petr Uhl in Czechoslovakia, Bukovsky in the USSR . . . how do you explain it?

Adam Michnik: Yes, in this context I think that “anti-authoritarian” is the key word. We rebelled against different authorities, but the sense of rebellion was the common denominator . . .

Cohn-Bendit: It was an anti-authoritarian revolution.

Michnik: Obviously.

Cohn-Bendit: And that’s our generation’s common experience.
Michnik: That generation brought something quite specific to the Polish opposition.

Cohn-Bendit: To all contesting oppositions, even if the ideas were at opposite ends of the spectrum. Well, maybe not opposite, but different.

Michnik: Yes, Dany, that’s how it is. And it is no coincidence that I supported the May 1968 movement in France. Which wasn’t the case for my father. He used to say, “This Cohn-Bendit is a fascist bastard.” And I would say, “No, it’s me.”—Krivine and his band are a bunch of Stalinist morons.—No, it’s me.—This Tariq Ali, this Pakistani in England, is a Soviet agent.—No, it’s me.—This Tom Hayden is a KGB agent.—No, it’s me. I can really say that on that occasion my father and I argued about principles.²

“Anti-authoritarian” describes Michnik and Cohn-Bendit’s transideological bond well, of course, but even better for our purposes would be “anti-institutional.” There was Nixon, of course, and Brezhnev, and de Gaulle and other individual authorities to oppose, but the focus of the period critique was on systemic social forms—institutions, in a word—rather than on specific personalities or entities, and it transcended great political divides, that between anticapitalism and antisocialism being only the most obvious. Institutions were understood to be the means by which authority exercised itself and were thus by definition—regardless of the politics of the institution in question—the embodiment of conservatism and constriction, of untruth and unfreedom, of illegitimate authority.

Most of the critical-theoretical accounts of institutionality that we might normally turn to for understanding of the artistic practice of institutional critique emerged out of this same period and simply reaffirm its tendance Groucho rather than opening out to the sort of historical understanding of the peculiarities of the specific form of artistic criticality that concerns us here. The examples are legion, so I will only quickly review several of the more influential cases in point, all drawn from that tendency in French theory that, by the mid-1970s, would successfully dominate academic anti-institutionalism on the whole. Think, for example, of the deep-thinking anti-Stalinist author of the 1975 opus The Imaginary Institution of Society, Cornelius Castoriadis, who argued that “once an institution is established it seems to become autonomous” and, thus, “outstrips its function, its ‘ends,’ and its reasons for existing.” As a result, what could have been seen as “an ensemble of institutions in the service of society becomes a society in the service of institutions.”³ Or think of Louis Althusser, in his famous 1970 account of ISAs or ideological state apparatuses, which he described as “distinct and specialized institutions” (meaning distinct from directly repressive institutions
like the army or police) which “function massively and predominantly by ideology,” ideology that was “realized in institutions, in their rituals and their practices.” ISAs were “the form in which the ideology of the ruling class must necessarily be realized,” he said, and that form was their institutionality. So too, finally and most influentially, think of Michel Foucault, who, in characteristic Nietzschean dressing, saw the answer to his well-known critique of the power/knowledge institutional nexus in a 1977 “dream of the intellectual destroyer of evidence and universalities, the one who, in the inertias and constraints of the present, locates and marks the weak points, the openings, the lines of power, who incessantly displaces himself, doesn’t know exactly where he is heading nor what he’ll think tomorrow because he is too attentive to the present.” Let “us have fresh air! fresh air! and keep clear of the madhouses and hospitals of culture!” is how Nietzsche himself had put the same dream nearly a century before, bringing it home in a manner that already anticipated the tendance Groucho that concerns us here: “A married philosopher belongs in comedy,” not in the serious business of cultural critique, he wrote, “that is my proposition.”

The gist of all of these critiques and the period’s anti-institutionalism as a whole was pretty simple: institutionality was another name for received thought congealed into a social form that veils or otherwise inhibits the possibility of self-creation. The solution, most agreed in one way or another with Nietzsche, was to step outside that institutionality altogether, outside the “madhouses and hospitals of culture,” into some form of indeterminacy or performativity or self-assertion that did not fall into the institutional trap or what Castoriadis called “the autonomization of institutions in relation to society.” Understood in such terms, who, indeed, would want to live in an institution?

That said, there was one institution that spoke to the surge of anti-institutionalism of the late 1960s while continuing to provide those “humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction” as if they themselves embodied progressive social change—that is, what Peter Bürger would come to label in 1974 the “institution of art.” In one sense modern art has always been a different sort of institution, of course, and the rules of its game have been defined in part by a form of nonparticipation or a manner of institutionalized noninstitutionality. On the whole, the art of the 1960s defined itself at a distance from the twin institutional forms of politics and the marketplace—in the camp consumerism and camp agitprop of pop, for example, or the quirky industrial “specificity” and academic phenomenality of minimalism, or in the epistemologically and politically indifferent semiosis of
conceptual art, or finally the self-reflexive, shoot-yourself-in-the-foot criticality of institutional critique. But that resistance to being folded into market or political obligations does not mean that it did not take on an institutional role as art, thereby providing a very specific set of constraints that did indeed shape human interaction. This, of course, was Bürger’s concern, and he derided 1960s art for merely playing at stepping outside its own institutionality; calling it “neo-avantgarde,” he cast it with institutionalized art as a whole, variously as “the objectification of the self-understanding of the bourgeois class” or “aestheticism.”8 In other words, art institutionalized was art for its own sake and, as such, was a mirror image of the bourgeoisie’s own sense of itself rising up and lording it over the culture at large as a universal and translucent ruling subject for its own sake, no longer in need of divine sanction or authorization by military might. Its principle was housed in the “ism” part of the term “aestheticism,” in the becoming institutional or becoming self-authorized of that which had once defined itself—back during its own revolutionary epoch in the eighteenth century—precisely by its distance from institutional being, by its distance from any sort of identity, by its transcendence of institutionality as such in the heady ether of individual bodily experience become universal meaning and purpose.

The transformation from the protopolitical, extrainstitutional, universal purpose of the revolutionary bourgeoisie to the postpolitical, institutionalized loss of that purpose for the later bourgeois ruling class—that is, from the self-expression of the capitalist class in the eighteenth century to its tactical self-abnegation in the twentieth—more or less summarizes the history of modern art, but this latter-day condition became particularly acute by the end of the 1960s. As Bürger would put it in a later publication, “The singular term ‘institution of art’ highlights the hegemony of one conception of art,” a hegemony that came to be demonstrated, he insisted, by one particularly significant factor: “the struggle against committed art.”9 The original bourgeois institution of art, with all the baggage of its transformation from a genuine universalism to a counterfeit or false one, would carry on through all the experiments with new and different media that characterized the art of the 1960s. The great irony and great surprise, for our purposes, is that, contrary to Bürger and the period anti-institutionalism that his study grew out of, that institution would come to be most powerfully defended, articulated, and renewed by the art development that presumed to the greatest degree of institutional self-reflexivity—that is, what we have come to call “institutional critique.”
If we had to put a label on the anomaly at issue here, we might say that the genre of institutional critique as it took form at the end of the 1960s was more conflicted than most about the period’s emerging *tendance Groucho* and that it remained tied to—or found purpose in returning to—the older, residual *tendance Karl*. The principle of institutionality itself was always at the heart of the bourgeois concept of modern art, taking its lead, first, from the great historic figures of the bourgeoisie—the various allegories of liberty and equality, the citizen, the parliament, the museum, and the public sphere—and, later, from the great historic figures of socialism—the laborer, the factory, the soviet, the party, the international, the masses. That dream of becoming social, becoming institutional, of becoming *governmental* in its larger (pre-Foucauldian, pre-*tendance Groucho*) sense, ultimately, was also always the dream of becoming human, of self-realization: “When the laborer co-operates systematically with others”—that is, when he becomes part of an assembly line, a soviet, a party, a class, an institution—as the original *tendance Karl* famously had it, “he strips off the fetters of his individuality, and develops the capabilities of his species.”

This great human potential, realized by the highly developed social forms and processes of capitalism, always had an evil underside as well in Marx’s view, and that travesty could not be separated from the historical development of their promise: “If then, on the one hand, the capitalist mode of production is a historically necessary condition for the transformation of the labor process into a social process, so, on the other hand, this social form of the labor process is a method employed by capital for the more profitable exploitation of labor, by increasing its productive power.” That exploitation was achieved by technological and managerial means, of course, but also through the production of alienation or ideology or commodity fetishism or the institution of art—that is, by creating the illusion that the complex social systems and processes that capitalism had enabled were, in fact, the sociality of things rather than people and therefore beyond the control of those they represented. Even as it came to embody that alienation in the principle of art for its own sake, modern art also promised an alternative to that alienation, an alternative way to experience sociality as a person rather than a thing, and in so doing a manner of redeeming the compromised promise of capitalist modernity. It was never a fully satisfactory or successful redemption, and—like labor—was always already complicit or coextensive with its own exploitation; but
it did—like labor—provide a reminder of the Enlightenment dream of what humanity could be. In this way aesthetics and politics, the bourgeois concept of modern art and socialism, have always been inseparable, and it is that inseparability, that human self-realization in becoming social, that would become the root justification for the artistic practice of institutional critique.

The *comedy* of institutional belonging, as Nietzsche called it—of being a married philosopher, for example, or a movement artist, or an ivory tower art historian, or a concerned citizen—and its cunning postmodern antidote of always sidestepping institutionalization in order to find fresh air, of incessantly displacing oneself from social forms as they begin to congeal and cohere into “the madhouses and hospitals of culture,” will be familiar to many readers of this volume. I do not mean to downplay the tremendous importance that such ideals have had in defining a critical function for art and criticality more broadly since 1968. Indeed, I take Immanuel Wallerstein to be largely right in his assessment of recent history: “The conclusion that the world’s populations drew from the performance of the classical antisystemic movements in power was negative,” he writes, referring most centrally to the broad historical sweep of communism and affiliated anticapitalist movements:

*They ceased to believe that these parties would bring about a glorious future or a more egalitarian world and no longer gave them their legitimation; and having lost confidence in the movements, they also withdrew their faith in the state as a mechanism of transformation. This did not mean that large sections of the population would no longer vote for such parties in elections; but it had become a defensive vote, for lesser evils, not an affirmation of ideology or expectations.*

That said, however, the artistic practice of institutional critique as it is understood here is something largely different in its critical emphasis from the new left politics that emerged in the wake of these failures and therefore is unavailable to the theoretical musings of the likes of Castoriadis, Althusser, and Foucault, and falls outside of the purview given to us by Wallerstein’s history of legitimacy. Put simply, the anomalous investment in institutional critique had little of the defensive reaction that Wallerstein speaks of and little of the institutional-outsiderism of its contemporaries. Against many of the postmodernisms that would emerge subsequently, institutional critique retained its commitment to the old promise of institutionality.
In this way institutional critique as an artistic genre stood opposed to anti-institutionality as such, not just that of the period tendance Groucho but also to that which had come to be the trademark of the bourgeoisie soon after it came to power. “The attitude of the bourgeois to the institutions of his regime is like that of the Jew to the law” is the analogy Marx and comrade Engels used with characteristic anti-Semitism; “he evades them whenever it is possible to do so in each individual case, but he wants everyone else to observe them.” What is relevant for our purposes is the contradiction—“If the entire bourgeoisie, in a mass and at one time, were to evade bourgeois institutions, it would cease to be bourgeois conduct which, of course, never occurs to the bourgeois and by no means depends on their willing or cunning”—a contradiction that makes itself manifest in various forms:

The dissolute bourgeois evades marriage and secretly commits adultery; the merchant evades the institution of property by depriving others of property by speculation, bankruptcy, etc.; the young bourgeois makes himself independent of his own family, if he can by in fact abolishing the family as far as he is concerned. But marriage, property, the family remain untouched in theory, because they are the practical basis on which the bourgeoisie has erected its domination, and because in their bourgeois form they are the conditions which make the bourgeois a bourgeois, just as the constantly evaded law makes the religious Jew a religious Jew. This attitude of the bourgeois to the conditions of his existence acquires one of its universal forms in bourgeois morality.

To which, of course, Marx and Engels responded with the demand to think all social institutions as such—that is, as types rather than individual instances: marriage, property, family, worker, party, class, etc. Typology was itself social thinking, institutional thinking, class thinking, and it was only as such that the truth of class could be made available to consciousness, even if it occasionally devolved from meaningful abstraction into the philosophical, political, and anthropological falsity of stereotyping and racism. All forms of thinking have their limits, including that “stripped of the fetters of individuality.”

In order to fully appreciate the difference between such typological thinking and the methodological individualism of the bourgeoisie and its theorists that came to undercut the social meaning of art, we will need to trace a history back to its modernist foundations and understand better what it is that Bürger called the “institution of art.” At the outset, we
should put forward a disclaimer that will already be well understood by most readers: the category that concerns us is not simply reducible to the social and economic institutions that house and support visual art—museums, galleries, individual and corporate art collections, universities, academic presses, art magazines, and the like. We might appropriately begin this genealogical endeavor to get at Bürger’s broader understanding, then, not via sociological inquiry but instead by philosophy. In particular, we can start with the bourgeoisie’s now much-sullied claim to universalism that would continue to serve as the foundation for modern art and its larger political aims up through the middle of the twentieth century, even as its legitimacy deteriorated with the process of institutionalization. Here, for example, is how one scholar has painted that original impetus, albeit with the broadest of brushes: “As the European bourgeoisie externally encompassed the whole world and in so doing postulated one mankind, it set out inwardly, in the name of the same argumentation, to shatter the Absolutist order.” The inwardliness that Reinhart Koselleck wrote of here, in his 1959 Critique and Crisis, is not inwardliness toward the interiority of the nation but instead toward the interiority of the self. As he describes this turn in its founding form, “a deep breach was laid in the subject’s position” such that matters of the heart were kept sharply distinct from matters of politics: “A prudent man withdraws into the secret chambers of his heart, where he remains his own judge, but external actions are to be submitted to the ruler’s judgment and jurisdiction.” Put in summary form, a manner of separated, autonomous inwardliness emerged as the vehicle for the formation of a counterhegemony—initially in the name of universal reason and the “rights of man”—and as such served as a form of protopolitics. This would end in travesty, at least according to Koselleck, writing immediately after World War II, but that is not our concern here. Rather, our focus is on art’s distinctive form of institutional thinking and the role that came to play in the genre known as institutional critique.

In this regard, it is important to remember that the modern concept of the humanly derived institution and the modern notion of critique came of age in concert. Each in its own way and in its own time emerged as a figure for political participation in response to early modern absolutism: first, the sovereignty of the state shifted from the body of the king to the body of the Leviathan; and second, the measure of participation in that sovereignty shifted from contracted obedience born of life-threatening necessity to the courage to use one’s reason without direction from another and, therefore, to rethink and renegotiate that contract. “Our age is the genuine age of criticism, to which everything must submit,” boasted
Kant famously, but so too and not unrelatedly, of course, would his age become the “genuine age” of institutions: institutions such as assemblies and legislatures and congresses and parliaments, of course, but also the institution of art especially as it came to be lodged in the museum. Together these were the institutions of criticism, of “free and public examination,” that were the condition and purpose for what Kant called (anticipating the central problem of his third critique) the newly “ripened power of judgment.”

Parliaments and museums are different sorts of institutions, of course. One presumes to represent the public will, the other presumes to give occasion for private sentiments and pleasures. Modern art of the sort that anticipated the salons des refusés, the urge to épater les bourgeois, and the like, if it amounts to anything of value at all, has always been about reconciling these opposites: bringing public and private, parliament and museum, the abstract-collective and the concrete-particular, the exterior and the interior, consensus and critique, the political and the aesthetic, into concert with each other. It has rarely if ever succeeded at this intention, or rather its successes have only been fleeting at the very best. But success in the normal sense is not really the point. The goal has never been to make individual desire and the collective will of the democratic process fully isomorphic: few imagine art to be a matter of sustained serious concern for parliaments or for the details of parliamentary matters to be sorted out in museums. Rather, at its best, modern art stages the dialogue between the two—between art and politics, between individuality and collectivity—by serving as occasion for a concrete-particular response to the abstract, statistical experience of collective decision making. Sometimes it does so explicitly, but mostly not. It is always an experience of withdrawing into the secret chambers of one’s heart, for sure, but it is so inseparably within the context of the world outside.

This dialogue between outside and inside, politics and aesthetics, has always been achieved by the specific modern means we have already alluded to but now need to state explicitly. Put most simply, that means was realized through a process of self-negation or self-abstraction—this is the heart and soul of modern art, of its aim to épater les bourgeois and embrace its position as refusé. What is sometimes not adequately appreciated is the origin of this tactic—and thus of modernism as a whole—in capitalism itself, in experiencing oneself as a commodity, as a quantum of labor defined not by human self-realization but instead by its relational position in “a given state of society, under certain social average conditions of production, with a given social average intensity, and average skill of the labor employed.” Understood formally, such self-abstraction is the same as that of Kant’s vaunted
formula for the bodily experience that binds the different faculties of reason in common cause, “purposiveness without purpose”; or the great philosophical self-abstraction of Hegel’s Geist, “The true is the whole”; or the historic, revolutionary self-abstraction of Marxian class consciousness:

Thus things have now come to such a pass that the individuals must appropriate the existing totality of productive forces, not only to achieve self-activity, but, also, merely to safeguard their very existence. This appropriation is first determined by the object to be appropriated, the productive forces, which have been developed to a totality and which only exist within a universal intercourse. From this aspect alone, therefore, this appropriation must have a universal character corresponding to the productive forces and the intercourse.20

That “universal character,” in other words, is the self-abstraction of institutionality itself, of organized collective expression, of “humanly devised constraints that shape human interaction.” The history of the bourgeoisie is a history of the tension between the becoming social and the unbecoming social of that interaction, of becoming conscious and unbecoming conscious. The substance or purpose or meaning of the institution of art has always been this battle line, and institutional critique as a genre—like modernism as a whole—routinely attempted to reverse that process of unbecoming, to call art back to the sociality of its expression, to wrench it away from the overwhelming, dehumanizing process of becoming a “social hieroglyphic” or “fantastic form of a relation of things.”21

Although it arose in the late 1960s, institutional critique was a distinctive practice in that context because it was modernist in this sense: it held on to the aim of critical negation that is not negation for negation’s sake or negation as a means of stepping outside of institutionality altogether, but instead expected a process of reconciliation that would be achieved in the resulting debate. In so doing it held firm to the principle of self-abstraction that is the lifeblood of institutionality. The measure of institutional critique’s modernism, and thereby the measure of its anomalousness or incompatibility with the postmodernism of Castoriadis, Althusser, Foucault, and their contemporaries, was thus the degree to which it sought to redeem the institution of art, the degree to which it demanded that the institution live up to its founding ideals, the degree to which it insisted that the abstract-collective will of the museum and other institutions be rendered responsible to concrete-particular human desires. It is in this sense more than any other that we can speak of institutional cri-
tique in the past tense—as a modernist impulse in an era when that impulse was no longer believed in or understood—but that is a matter of history now. The more pressing question is what meaning or purpose institutional critique, or its memory, holds for us today.

II

Institutional critique preserved the institution of art in the context of 1968’s broad disavowal of institutionality by holding it accountable to its founding ideals—this, more or less, can serve as a summary of my argument so far. The status of institutionality today is a different matter, however, and, broadly speaking, we can understand it to be structured by a governing antinomy or contradiction defined by two countervailing trends. It is this antinomy that can be said to be our postmodernity and to have pushed the meaning and purpose of institutional critique out of the category of contemporary art and into the past where it sits for us only in posse.

On the one hand, we can see from our perspective today a general recession or dispersion of institutions as we have known them, that is, of the old hierarchical social organizations that aided and abetted social life, the institutions that were of particular concern for Althusser, Castoriadis, and Foucault. Think, for example, of the church or the party or the sundry civil-social institutions considered by Robert Putnam in his book *Bowling Alone*; or think of the old television or radio network, or the Hollywood studio, or the mass-market publisher; or, closer still to home for some of us, think of the august institutions of higher learning or fine art appreciation or investigative journalism, or even the weighty institutions of governance and law at any level, from the local to the global. With their imperious Latin pediment inscriptions, dignified chambers of deliberation, dutifully guarded wall decorations, and with their allusions to the fantastic realms of the public, the nation, or the world, these great modern bodies now not only seem ideological in the ways that Althusser and Foucault and others decried forty years ago, but increasingly reek of decay and a sedimented past. Even their marble-and-mortar materiality seems surprisingly archaic, surprising un- able to keep up with the accelerated shape-shifting of our present-day, technologically enabled capitalist globalization.

Depending on how strongly we feel ourselves in the thrall of the postmodern present, these musty old halls of truth, beauty, and justice might as well take on the other-worldly character of institutions of an even more distant time. Listen, for example, to their
resonances with Ernst Kantorowicz’s description of what he took to be a distinctly medieval form of institutionality:

_The Christian . . . had become the citizen of a city in another world. Ethically, death for the carnal fatherland meant little if compared with that for the spiritual patria, Jerusalem in Heaven, or, with the true models of civic self-sacrifice, the martyrs, confessors, and holy virgins. The saints had given their lives for the invisible community in heaven and the celestial city, the true patria of their desires; and a final return to that fatherland in Heaven should be the normal desire of every Christian soul, while wandering in exile on earth._23

The university, or the museum, or the party, or the fourth estate, or the democratic process writ large—these were our “spiritual patria,” our “Jerusalem in Heaven,” our counterinstitutions, and they long provided a cosmopolitan otherworldliness and globalist ethical orientation that grounded a critical relation to abuses of social, political, and economic power in the name of private enterprise or the nation-state. These were, in other words, the levers of publicity that forestalled the forces of privatization by provoking and sanctioning public debate. Now their very institutionality, their centralized organizational structure, with its grand civic spaces and rigorous gatekeeping that endowed, authorized, and empowered the processes of critique and debate, seems to be at risk of collapsing—for good and for bad—under pressure from the new technologically enabled forms of peer-to-peer social organization. This is, as Stephen Colbert called it, our “wikiality,” and we might well see the rise of peer-to-peer networks and the rise of viral marketing and Karl Rove’s push polling—or, more broadly, the legacy of the 1960s counterculture and the reemergence of Republican laissez-faire, antigovernment activism that began in earnest in the 1980s—to be of a piece in its name.24 In a fully realized postinstitutional, peer-to-peer world, consensus replaces truth, beauty, and justice, and the old institutions that supported those ideals—museums, universities, courts of law, and the like—lose their authority to the anti-institutional epistemology of the smear and the fad.

On the other hand, however, we can also speak of another deep structural change occurring during the same period with a symbiotic if opposite effect—that is, the dramatically increased pervasiveness and power of the corporation, with its limited liability and limited accountability. If the decline in our relationship to institutionality can be traced back most immediately to 1968 and to the resurgence of “big government” critiques that cropped
up in response to Johnson’s Great Society programs, as well as to the turn toward a newly extrapoli
tical, extrainstitutional counterculturalism such as articulated by the Whole Earth Catalog,25 the re
newed surge of corporate institutionality might be dated to 1973 and tied to three significant events that combined to encourage a more proactive, more politically expansive corporatism: the OPEC oil embargo, the Chilean coup, and the founding of the Heritage Foundation.26 On the most general level, this antinomy of decreased identification with the old institutions of church and state, of higher learning and art appreciation, on the one hand, and a newly expanded geopolitical mission for corporations, on the other, found its resolution in a historic shift of the meaning of institutionality away from the principles of public accountability and public enfranchisement and toward private gain and limited accountability.

While this combination of a diminution of public institutionality and an intensification of private institutionality in the wake of the 1960s is part of a larger process of postmodernization tied to the longer history of the cold war, it still amounted to a sea change on its own. Among other more significant effects, it summoned a loss of purpose for institutional critique at the moment of its inception.27 That purpose, again, was to hold public or quasi-public institutions—institutions like museums, universities, and governments—accountable to their public mission, or at least to a public mission for art. We can see this role at work in the early years and up to the present—most directly in the work of Hans Haacke, for example, or in the various demands made by groups like the Art Workers’ Coalition, the Guerrilla Art Action Group, or the Tucumán Arde group in Argentina, or later by Adrian Piper, or the Guerrilla Girls, or Andrea Fraser, or Fred Wilson. The role taken by artists engaged in institutional critique was deeply indebted to that old modernist ideal of the “spiritual patria” or “Jerusalem in Heaven”—our old, dear concept of good, healthy, and just institutionality; our long-held ideal of a good, healthy, and just society. Perhaps the greatest of all these works—a work that might be taken as the capstone of the movement, even—is Haacke’s magisterial Der Bevölkerung, installed in the Reichstag in the year 2000. Not only does this piece call on the German parliament to account for the publicness of its mission, but it also enacts that publicness itself, and in so doing realizes what it calls for rather than simply criticizing an existing institution for its failure to live up to its own founding principles. We might also take Allan Kaprow’s plaintive cry in 1967, “Where art thou, sweet muse?”, to speak to this desire for good, healthy, or just institutionality, even though it was intended as mockery. (“To my way of thinking,” Kaprow said, “the museum is a fuddy-duddy
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remnant from another era” best turned into a swimming pool or nightclub or emptied and left as an environmental sculpture.) Even his archaic English gives us a useful sense of the rich historical status of this ideal—the old promise of the museum as a founding institution of the public sphere, as a kind of “Thou” in the sense of Martin Buber’s great 1923 I and Thou: “When Thou is spoken, the speaker has no thing; he has indeed nothing. But he takes his stand in relation.” That “stand in relation,” or “universal intercourse,” is what always distinguished public sovereignty from individual autonomy and was the original meaning of modern art’s promised sweetness and light, as well as the lifeblood of the tendance Karl discussed above.

This split between these two tendances or critical approaches to institutionality can also be located geopolitically. Whereas one found its purpose in neoliberalism’s North American base and South American outpost and can be said to have been born in protest against the changes in the way we think about and experience institutions—protesting the loss of that old promise of sweetness and light to privatization—the second tendency, already indicated by Kaprow’s mockery, found its purpose elsewhere. Philosophically in line with the broader tendance Groucho, that elsewhere was nowhere: it had no specific conceptual or political housing and instead sought to place itself outside of institutionality as such. Asger Jorn had summed up this principle already in 1960, before Castoriadis, Althusser, Foucault and others would make it into period doctrine: “The form of a container is a form contrary to the form of its contents; its function is to prevent the contents from entering into process.”

Geographically, the heart of anti-institutionalism was located in neoliberalism’s main adversary—the late socialist world of Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, and China, and, to a lesser degree, in the democratic socialism of Western Europe. There, the old Enlightenment

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Hans Haacke, *Der Bevölkerung*, 2000. Photograph by Stefan Müller 2008, courtesy of Hans Haacke. © Hans Haacke/Artists Rights Society (ARS). Haacke set up a 21-by-7-meter garden in the center of the courtyard in the Berlin Reichstag (government building) with the phrase “DER BEVÖLKERUNG” (to the population) inscribed on the ground in neon letters. By invitation from Haacke, parliament representatives have filled the garden with soil from their constituencies (currently the count is up to 275 MPs). Over the years a dense vegetation has grown on its own in the soil provided. “Der Bevölkerung” refers to the words “Dem Deutschen Volke” (to the German people) inscribed in 1916 on the west portal of the parliament building.
ideals lived on to a degree that they did not in the neoliberal nexus of the Americas; and as the anti-Stalinism of the postwar period matured, the failure of state socialism welled up even more as the institutional issue of the day. At the end of the 1950s, Albert Camus commented, in words that just as well could have been those of Eastern Europe’s 68ers or of the dissidents who would emerge in the Soviet Union and China in years to come: “Every writer tries to give a form to the passions of his time. Yesterday it was love. Today the great passions of unity and liberty disrupt the world. Yesterday love led to individual death. Today collective passions make us run the risk of universal destruction. Today, just as yesterday, art wants to save from death a living image of our passions and our sufferings.”

So it was that the residual threat of collectivization remained more pressing in the old stomping grounds of Hitler and Mussolini through the 1960s and 1970s than it did in the Americas where corporatization reigned, and was even more intense across the spheres of influence still dominated by Brezhnev and Mao. This threat affected artists as much as or more than anyone else, but resulted in a wide-reaching existentialism; as the future artist-president Václav Havel put it a decade after the Prague Spring and a decade prior to the Velvet Revolution, there was a desire to “shed the burden of traditional political categories and habits and open oneself up fully to the world of human existence,” to turn “away from abstract political visions of the future toward concrete human beings.” That Havel’s anti-institutionalism would turn so readily into the neoliberal “gangster capitalism” (as he called it) of his successor Václav Klaus, and thus join the great wave of postsocialist globalization, may not seem so surprising to those of us in the west, but it certainly seemed to surprise Havel and other 68ers like him in the eastern bloc who had rallied to his existentialist position: he came to call his pro-Klaus adversaries in the press the “snide brigade” when he became their principal target “and the expression ‘nonpolitical politics’ became a popular sneer.”

As with any bit of history, we will really only understand what institutional critique was by seeing the ways in which it was bound up deeply with the larger contradictions of its time, and we can only fully understand its historical meaning now by appreciating the legacy of those contradictions in the world we find ourselves in today. “Nonpolitical politics” is certainly one such contradiction, as the snide brigade astutely observed—or they might well have complained about the noninstitutional institution of Havel’s government or his tendance Groucho. Some such characterization might equally well describe almost all of the art that falls under Bürger’s rubric of the neo-avantgarde—we might simply call it art that
pretends it is not art, or art that disavows its own institutional status. The ultimate realization of the old Enlightenment dream of “purposiveness without purpose”—of art living by its own rules and in so doing setting the terms for society at large, of artistic autonomy as the foundational instance in which man “strips off the fetters of his individuality, and develops the capabilities of his species”—had also been the greatest travesty of those same principles. What Bürger missed by focusing narrowly on the nineteenth-century bourgeois institution of art was the way in which its origin in universalism was both realized and corrupted in the Soviet policy of socialist realism and, in turn, the way this later form served as the motor driving all that he decried with the term “neo-avantgarde.” After all, the art movements of the later 1950s and 1960s that deserve this label failed by Bürger’s measure because of their refusal of politics, their “struggle against committed art,” and that struggle was born first and foremost from the larger culture of the anti-Stalinist left. As Kaprow described it in one standard piece of period wisdom about art’s “deeper predicament,” art could no longer “provide the utopian solutions to the world’s ills that it had once promised.”34 This predicament was an understandable reaction to the failure of state socialism, and its resulting tendance Groucho served as the great lever of postmodernism’s “incredulity towards meta-narratives” more generally, its incredulity toward universals, its incredulity, ultimately, toward what we have been calling the institution of art.35 Today we can look back at this predicament and see that it was an indicator of the great geopolitical changes that would come in 1989.

By contrast, when viewed as a countercurrent to 1968’s tendance Groucho, institutional critique can be seen not simply as different or out of synch but instead as exceptional and exemplary in serving as a reminder of what the bourgeois project and its proletarian offshoot once promised, in a world that tries to rid us of that memory.36 That legacy lives on, of course, and not only in the ongoing practices of intrepid stalwarts like Haacke, Fraser, and the Guerrilla Girls. Perhaps its most vital offspring, now, can be found among those who work in the genre loosely known as “tactical media”—artists and groups like the Yes Men, Critical Art Ensemble, Institute for Applied Autonomy, Natalie Bookchin and Jacqueline Stevens, Trevor Paglin, Steve Lambert, and others. The investment in institutionality by these artists is different, of course—as a rule they occupy private institutions and redirect them to public ends rather than occupying public institutions and holding them accountable to their founding purpose—but the principle of institutionality as the form of public accountability posed against the powerful privatizing force of neoliberal anti-institutionalism is the same.
Throughout the UC Davis campus there are state-mandated signs announcing construction of new buildings. Oddly, some of the signs are for buildings for which funding has changed priorities, or which are so early in the planning stages that no one knows whether or when they will be constructed. Lambert created his own sign for a building that was not part of any official plan.
We might end, then, with another equally revealing (and equally well known) May 1968 graffito in order to further situate the historically specific accomplishment of institutional critique in the context of the debates of its time. This one, memorialized by Lucien Goldmann, was scrawled on a blackboard in the Sorbonne: “Structures,” it said, “do not take to the streets.” The Marxist-cum-existentialist Goldmann used this graffito to provoke a debate in discussion following Foucault’s 1969 “What Is an Author?” lecture; slamming the structuralism still at that time associated with Foucault, Goldmann concluded with bombast, “It is never structures that make history; it is men.” Foucault marked his own then-emerging shift into poststructuralism and politics by disowning the term “structure” altogether, but fellow audience member Jacques Lacan defended structuralism’s honor against Goldmann’s critique. “I do not believe that it is at all legitimate to have written that structures do not take to the streets,” he countered, “because, if there is one thing demonstrated by the events of May, it is precisely that structures did take to the streets.” That these words were written at the Sorbonne where events originated “proves nothing,” he said, “other than, simply, that very often, even most often, what is internal to what is called action is that it does not know itself.”

We can take this rich period exchange to illustrate three complementary philosophies of history underlying what we have been calling the period’s tendance Groucho: Goldmann’s insistence that individuals make history, in one corner; Lacan’s structural determinism, in another; and in a third, Foucault’s stepping outside of history-making entirely in the great trickster figure “who incessantly displaces himself, doesn’t know exactly where he is heading nor what he’ll think tomorrow because he is too attentive to the present.”

What none of these positions allowed for as they took stands in relation to each other was a meaningful critical role for institutions, and particularly not for the institution of art as the locus classicus of the public sphere. As one study has stated about the afterlife of these positions, “the new spirit of capitalism shares an often virulent anti-statism with liberalism,” one that “has its origins in the critique of the state [and its ideological apparatuses and discourses] developed by the ultra-left in the 1960s and 1970s.” Preserving the institutionality of critique given by the tendance Karl against the tendance Groucho’s anti-institutionalism is the great modernist promise that the art practice of institutional critique held out in the rising tide of the various postmodernisms from ultraleft to ultraright since the 1960s. It is the memory of that historically specific charter that might serve us now.
NOTES

11. Ibid., 453.
14. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 19.
17. As one reviewer summarized the “pathogenesis” argument in 1976, “Koselleck’s thesis, briefly stated, is the following: absolute monarchy created a suprarational, rational sphere of action which helped Europe overcome the state of permanent religious civil war. However, the inner sphere of private life, left vacant by the state, became a new source of disturbance that constantly extended its frontiers until it sucked the state, the embodiment of reason, into a vortex of ideological civil war.” Bedrich Loewenstein, in *Journal of Modern History* 48, no. 1 (March 1976), 122.
what was institutional critique?


23. Ernst H. Kantorowicz, “Pro Patria Mori in Medieval Political Thought,” American Historical Review 56, no. 3 (April 1951): 475.

24. Stephen Colbert first used this term on The Colbert Report on July 31, 2006. For thoughtful if perhaps overly optimistic accounts of the technologically enabled minimizing of gatekeeping and management in institution building, see Clay Shirkey, Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organization (New York: Penguin, 2008), and Yochai Benkler, The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006). For more sober accounts, see Fred Turner, From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), and, for example, this summary passage: “To those who think of the 1960s primarily as a break with the decades that came before, the coming together of former counterculturalists, corporate executives, and right-wing politicians and pundits may appear impossibly contradictory. But as the history of the Whole Earth network suggests, it isn’t. As they turned away from agnostic politics and towards technology, consciousness and entrepreneurship as the principles of the new society, the communards of the 1960s developed a utopian vision that was in many ways quite congenial to the insurgent Republicans of the 1990s” (p. 8). One source, writing in the Center for Media and Democracy’s wiki and stretching the definition somewhat, cites Hans Haacke as the originator of push polling: http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Push_poll.

25. As Simon Sadler notes, “where particularity matters the most—in the political realm—the Whole Earth network constantly moved attention away from particular sufferings, inequities, and identities,” but it took very seriously its charge to articulate and organize a new peer-to-peer “vastly expanded realm of nonexpertise” toward a network of knowledge and social creation outside the existing institutional framework. Simon Sadler, “An Architecture of the Whole,” Journal of Architectural Education 61 (May 2008): 118, 127.


27. For more on this larger process of postmodernization and its ties to the longer history of the cold war, see my study The Pivot of the World: Photography and Its Nation (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).


33. See Havel's account of his relationship with Klaus in the excerpt from his 2007 memoir *To the Castle and Back* at http://www.nybooks.com/articles/20153.


36. Here is one recent account of something like that promise: “The suspicion of institutions has traditionally turned, not merely on bureaucracy as something unremittingly felt to be legalistic and inhuman, if not corrupt, but above all very precisely on their inevitably conspiratorial procedures. As Brecht put it, ‘what's breaking into a bank compared with founding a bank?’—while in a time-honored piece of American folk wisdom, it has from time to time also been remembered that business is a conspiracy against the public. . . . The Utopian dimension of institutions is however their collective existence and structure. Insofar as conspiracy theory celebrates this collective dynamic and seeks to replace the categories of individual agency with collective ones, it marks a first imperfect step in that direction. Cynical reason, meanwhile, while seeming to strip acts and events of their appearance of disinterestedness, might well pave the way for some ultimate awareness of collective self-interest as such.” Fredric Jameson, “How Not to Historicize Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* (Spring 2008): 581–582.

