

What Next? Gean Moreno

How are art projects that pretend to maintain a critical relation to existing conditions effectively disseminated and legitimized in times when critique (as deployed through contemporary art production) has smashed against the unbendable reality of the self-cancellation inherent to its program? Or, to put it differently: How do critical projects circulate and find relevance in the Anthropocene, in the face of an irrevocable fading of the barrier between the processes of social history and those of natural history, of a biosphere whose newly emerging effects impinge on all aspects of human experience? How is criticality activated now that the real abstractions of the social relation, which determine so deeply how we are in the world, meet the “real abstraction” of climate change, which promises to equally determine our modes of behavior and cognition, propelled as we now are by a raw interest in survival? Or, from yet another angle: How do critical projects function in light of the rise of nonhuman agents, often interfacing among themselves, in the exchange of information and material, displacing meaningful intentionality with the exercise of correlating data sets, instituting a governmentality of algorithms? How do these efforts gain traction when talk of institutional interpellation is replaced by a colder rhetoric of fabrics of matter and molecularity of materials, of sentient environments and intelligence-augmenting prostheses, for which engineering more than critical theory provides the tools and tropes through which ideas find sensible form? In the vertigo of these new conditions, is the alternative space a productive site still available for critical production?

In whatever version we have come to know them, as either progressive institutions looking to defy the prevailing logic of capitalist relations (the commodity form, the exchange relation, the entrepreneurial drive of the studio-based practice) or as ameliorative regional institutions responding to barren cultural landscapes, alternative spaces are a rather new historical phenomenon, like the prevalence of think tanks in American politics. And nothing pushes for them to continue to exist indefinitely. One can even begin to wonder if the collapse of critique, its sad metamorphosis into a mollifying agent in light of the ravages of the contemporary economic system—palliative and posturing, when measured with the yardstick of effectivity, which coincides with the near total banalization of post-studio practice—doesn’t immediately place alternative spaces in a state of wayward moribundity, swerving against the rail of their superfluosity. Are the very ways in which they now perform, as well-behaved and defanged machines in the existing institutional ecology, a signal of declining relevance? In graphing the gradient of this drop, the soft swoop of the fall, however, do we

obfuscate the barbarous unkindness of history? The latter’s cuts are unnervingly cleaner; they do without the jittery edges of vacillation and know nothing of second chances, knotting repetition with farce.

The contrarian drive—once indexed by an indispensable entwining of grit and urgency—that animated alternative spaces has been quelled by years of being shackled to the rote labor of filling grant requests and organizing raffle fundraisers. There’s been a soft devastation, a quiet disassembly, propelled by certain prominent philanthropic habits, enacting through both private and public support systems, that rely on the easy comfort of quantification, that is, the demand for audience numbers at the expense of the more slippery and imprecise measurement of quality of experience. These habits, the commitments they demand from their institutional beneficiaries, impinge on and alter the nature of these beneficiaries. The latter find themselves in the untenable position of having to program for whatever swells the size of the audience, and this sort of programming slowly mangles the infrastructure that sustains it. Alternative spaces have gone from attempting to prefigure a different cultural sphere, from enacting the conditions of something still to come as a way to actualize it and generate a radical breach with the status quo, to being determined by existing conditions, being inscribed into them, as supposedly non-ideological repositories for new proposals—and archaeological recoveries—in the system. Nothing compromising that may derail funding, nothing too challenging that may curtail visits—this seems their unspoken credo, a counseling of eternal prudence, which has the side effect of simply turning the alternative space into an alternative route of integration in the prevalent modes of cultural production and circulation. After all, who wants leaky spigots and broken A/Cs, a return to crumminess?¹ What Deleuze said of the prison and the factory applies here just as well: “But everyone knows that these institutions are finished, whatever the length of their expiration period. It’s only a matter of administering their last rites and of keeping people employed until the installation of the new forces knocking at the door.”²

In a way, however, alternative spaces no longer exist—not even as dying things or as zombie structures hanging on and getting it wrong, expiring in slow motion, hiccupping the flatline. This is not the moment of their twilight, a little bit of life still in them that can limp on, soaked in sadness, in the absence of sustained scrutiny. The new conditions are here; the wake has gone on too long. We are hoarse from administering the last rites over and over. The wreaths have wilted. The corpse is cold and fetid. Distended where it gives. Patterned by

parching. Its stare is vacant; its eyes, presaging, as still as landscapes of full biological extinction, which may be just a wink away in cosmological timeframes. This is history’s brutal unkindness at work. People continue to file papers with the IRS, looking to establish 501(c)(3)s, and put together eager boards of directors, and call up their friends and kindle enthusiasm to refurbish old warehouses, but their faith, surely, can be dented by reality. They must know that they are transacting with the nonexistent, dancing with the cadaver of a typology that depended on specific social and economic conditions to make sense, to find traction and substance. This is old news. In 1982, Ingrid Sischy and Germano Celant wrote:

We are at a point, sadly, that the collective intention within the art community in the late ’60s and better part of the ’70s—to broaden the audience for art and increase the intellectual and economic autonomy of artists by establishing alternative exhibition spaces and alternative distribution systems for technologically reproducible media like print and video—met with only very partial “success.”³

The quotation marks are irony’s *sais* digging into the jugular of ordinary meaning—and not only that of the word they are thrust into but those of adjacent ones as well. They let us sense complete failure where a paltry *partial* stands in supporting role.

Alternative spaces—the idea of the alternative space—linger as gutted shells, husks of once-necessary animals. They are incongruous with our moment, except as sales promotion—this is how Marcel Broodthaers might have put it, clairvoyantly—for the order under which they operate, their vaunted recoil from a profit motive mere spiritual decoration. This is so, at the very least, because the historical conditions that made alternative spaces necessary, that marked them as an alternative, as an embodied counterfactual possibility to the dominant cultural order, no longer exist. These conditions have mutated into more malignant forms of economic rationality and control. A bleaker winter of flexible accumulation and proliferating foreclosures on the future has set in. And, unmoored from the conditions they addressed and challenged, alternative venues are now venom-less fetishes. In the dead sunshine of our days, alternative spaces are no more than remnants of a dream of a counter-hegemonic cultural sphere. There is no way to alleviate their obsolescence. They float unanchored, like hardware lost to gravity-less space. They are manifestations of pure ineffectiveness in the face of contemporary conditions—both those of a capitalism that continues to bloat, its procedures ineluctably