



An Institutional Politics of Place: Rethinking the Critical Function of Art in Times of Growing Inequality

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Abstract

This article reflects on the current status of art's critical power in a world of intensifying economic inequality. We document how the art world is saturated with economic imperatives that limit the power of conventional artistic critique to meaningfully contest economic instrumentalism. Such imperatives also constrain both artistic and curatorial choices, with profound implications for questions of representation. Informed by interviews with artists, curators and managers of leading art institutions in London, we outline an emergent politics that acknowledges the way that inequalities are sustained and accumulate over long periods of time and is committed to addressing 'historic wrongs'. We argue that an especially powerful dimension here is geographical, with institutions reconsidering their own historical and contemporary locations as a means of subverting universalising narratives that mask dominant power. We suggest that this focus on spatiality presents a promising approach to addressing contemporary inequalities in the art world by being able to productively link concerns around representation to a critical recognition of the spatially located impact of economic inequality.

Keywords

Art, inequality, institutional politics of place, restitution, subaltern critique

Introduction

Over recent decades, there has been increasing uncertainty about the prospects for 'artistic critique' in general, and for the critical potential of arts institutions in particular, to be socially and politically successful within the parameters of neo-liberal financialised capitalism (e.g. Boltanski and Chiapello, 2006; Rancière, 2007 [2003]). Numerous commentators have offered pessimistic prognoses that the critical power of the art world

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– however limited or constrained this might have been in the past – has waned amidst the forces of commercialisation, financialisation, and the retrenchment of public funding. This reflects the way that the echelons of the contemporary art sector in particular are substantially inflected by the investment potential of art works for the super-rich, and hence becomes symptomatic of financial motives that affect both what art is produced and art's legitimacy in acting as a critical public good (Fasche, 2013; Koh and Wissink, 2018; Robertson and Chong, 2008; Srakar and Čopič, 2012).

A central feature of this pessimistic sensibility is the recognition of the subtle incorporation of elites working in cultural institutions into financialised arrangements, in which fund raising and the running of arts institutions on business lines is taken for granted. In this article, we draw on interviews with senior staff in many of the UK's elite galleries and institutions to offer a subtly different perspective. We argue against overly pessimistic interpretations and argue that the saturation of commercial considerations within the art world allows the potential for a new kind of artistic critique – the 'institutional politics of place'. This depends on staking out positions that oppose commercial logics from the perspective of 'art situated in place'. This champions a politics of aiming to correct 'historic wrongs' and reflecting on the responsibilities of institutional power. This emergent 'institutional politics of place' offers repertoires that can allow art organisations to remain a crucial social tool and critical intermediary.

Our argument is based on the accounts of 24 qualitative interviews conducted in the course of this research between November 2019 and February 2020 with directors, curators and inclusiveness officers representing 17 museums, public and private galleries across Britain and Ireland, as well as with artists and (freelance) art consultants based in the UK. These elite interviews offered a remarkable window into the contemporary politics of the art establishment. Following the lead of Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) arguments that elites do not form a cosy exclusive club, but are in fact riven by internal faction fighting, we point to the counter-intuitive finding that precisely because arts institutions operate within increasingly financialised parameters, so they are able to contest commercial values from the perspectives of downtrodden and marginalised arts consumers. The logic of financialisation is thus janus-faced and leaves scope for a renewed critical vision.

Our argument proceeds as follows. First, we lay out the historical trajectories of artistic critique: the 'romantic'; the 'modernist'; and the 'subaltern'. The playing out of these three critical repertoires provides the historical context against which the account of today's cultural elite needs to be set. In the second part of the article, we focus on the accounts of qualitative interviews with directors and curators from key institutions in London's gallery and museum scene as well as with UK-based artists. We show that these qualitative interviews do not exhibit an overarching pessimism but rather testify to a sensitivity to how the location of art gives resources for a renewal of critical projects which point to the way that commercialisation marginalises disadvantaged communities. We argue that this politics in which display and representation are constantly being renegotiated vis-a-vis the art market, can be identified as the 'institutional politics of place'. We suggest that this is an emerging register that offers important tools for rethinking the role of arts institutions in relation to artistic critique in the face of growing inequality.

Aesthetic Critique in the Era of Financialisation and the Rise of the Super Wealthy

Three Repertoires of Artistic Critique

An enduring theme within 19th and 20th-century western modernity is the potential for art to offer redemptive and critical resources to challenge the dominance of capitalist principles. This celebration of the emancipatory power of art – and connected therewith of arts institutions – is bound up with powerful notions of cultivation, civilization, learning and creativity which have historically been held up as opposing commercialism. We can discern three major phases and components of this aesthetic critique. First, were the *romantic* and anti-utilitarian currents, which waxed during the late 18th and 19th centuries, and which harnessed nostalgic refrains intent on recovering human and creative values as means of resisting an increasingly secular, mechanistic and rationalist world. Forcibly represented in the writings of English critics and artists John Ruskin and William Morris, the focus was on how industrialism imported instrumental and de-humanising values which could be resisted by a restatement of artistic value, especially one which looked back to the artisanal values of craft production in which art, handicraft and technique were conjoined. Other strands – notably German Romanticism – railed against the formalist tendency of Enlightenment culture and espoused artistic genius and the creative act as the noblest expression of individual freedom, and therefore as metonymic of higher, universal truths. During the 19th century, this romantic critique gathered force and fed into many facets of anti-capitalist thinking. An enduring legacy of this intellectual strand is that art's greatest social responsibility remains its enmity with empiricism and its ambition to 'transgress systematicity' (Pollock, 2011).

Second, from the later 19th century, European romantic precepts were re-articulated by an emergent *modernism*, which became hegemonic during the early decades of the 20th century. Rather than embracing the nostalgic reconstruction of older forms of artistic production as with the pre-Raphaelites or the Arts and Crafts movement, this movement became associated with an aesthetic politics of 'arts for art's sake' in which the innate properties of artistic media were pursued in and for themselves ('The work of art', as Adorno wrote, 'becomes its own material', 2001). This is the current that Bourdieu (1993, 2018) famously took up in his theory of artistic fields, in which a symbolic revolution, led by Manet in France, resulted in a new consciousness by artists of the institutional and social conditions of artistic production, and devolved validation from official patrons and state institutions to an emerging 'art world' that deployed its own internal criteria of artistic excellence. In Bourdieu's eyes, these modernist currents thus allowed principles of artistic value to be clearly differentiated from commercial and political concerns, and hence permitted 'cultural capital' to operate by a different, (even if homologous) logic from capitalist commercialism. While modernism shared certain basic features with romanticist thought in being anti-commercial, it was, by contrast, forward-looking, adopting exploration of the principles of artistic production as the dynamic thrust of artistic progress and originality.

This second critique can be understood in the context of Bourdieu's field analysis – that the art field came into being through competitive processes in which those defining original and distinctive positions vis-à-vis other forces could exert leadership. Following

Bourdieu (1981), this positioning within an emergent art field required autonomy from strictly economic, commercial or political forces. For much of the 20th century modern and contemporary art can be seen as operating within these parameters – being driven by the close interaction and competition between those endowed with ‘field specific capital’, namely artists, private gallery owners, critics and a new class of collectors who were vested in the principles of artistic excellence. Gallerists like Paul Durand-Ruel, Ambroise Vollard, Daniel-Henri Kahnweiler and Herwarth Walden established the merits of artists who were their contemporaries and forged relations with collectors like Solomon R. Guggenheim, Albert C. Barnes and Gertrude & Leo Stein who offered an alternative to official patronage, thereby supporting artistic emancipation and the formation of an ‘*avant-garde*’. The new languages of modernity found their interpreters and staunchest supporters among art critics such as Roger Fry, Clive Bell, Meyer Shapiro, and Clement Greenberg, all of whom were influential among intellectual and ruling elites.

It was in this context that large public art galleries in Europe and North America flourished in the 20th century, with their concern to use predominantly public funds for their collections for educational and public display purposes. While their 19th-century iterations had initially comprised sprawling compendia of either scientific and anthropological materials, imperial loot, industrial technology and machinery, or academic art, much of it displayed on the basis of its perceived ability to edify the masses, the new museums of the 20th century also increasingly embraced modern art. Especially in the post-war period, the latter came to be seen as a new language that could guide society forward and as a bulwark to humanity’s most heinous tendencies.

By the final decades of the 20th century, a third phase was launched, due to an increasing awareness that the principles of the art field were losing their generative force for critical projects. This critique evoked subaltern forces, previously excluded or marginalised within the art world. An important inspiration came from Bourdieu’s (1985, 1996) emphasis that the field of art operated by its own principles of exclusion, which were actually co-constitutive of wider social power relations. Thus, in elaborating the concept of cultural capital, he insisted that only culturally privileged people had the capacity to engage in the field of art and therefore argued that its pursuit of the Kantian aesthetic was complicit in its own form of domination. As Bennett et al. (2009) have convincingly argued, the capacity for the disinterested exercise of aesthetic judgement was always predicated on having an economic status that allowed independence from ‘the dominion of others’, and thereby allowed aesthetic judgement to be uncorrupted by economic interest.

The recognition of systemic inequalities within the art field itself defined the third phase of artistic critique, which emerged concurrently with critical theory, cultural studies, post-colonial perspectives and postmodernist critique from the 1970s onwards. The so-called ‘*New Art History*’ included the Marxist social historical accounts of T.J. Clark, the feminist accounts of Griselda Pollock and Linda Nochlin, and the institutional critique of Alan Wallach and Carol Duncan, to name but a few. Other strands drew on the post-colonial critique of Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall to disrupt entrenched canons and their complicity in constructing and upholding western imperialism and white supremacy. Studies of queer art, black art, post-colonial art in general elaborated on an alternative set of intellectual resources to the range associated

with traditional connoisseurship (iconology, aestheticism, literary analysis) such as semiotics, post-structuralism and psychoanalysis. In different ways, these approaches all emphasised the economic, racist and misogynist underpinnings of artistic production, reception and display, and the complicity of cultural institutions in enshrining and reproducing colonial, elite values.

In hindsight, while generating pathbreaking and powerful spaces for grounded artistic critique and a critical politics of representation, this subaltern critique of the elitism of the art field coincided with a contradistinct attempt to reinvigorate art's critical relevance precisely by co-opting – as a means of subverting – the signs of an increasingly commoditised mass society (thus inverting art's postured apartness from markets). The commercial popularity of this project, exemplified by Warhol's work, weakened the efficacy of subaltern critique amidst the welter of new commercial initiatives. During the 1980s, there was hence an affinity between post-modernist currents and art that was becoming increasingly commercialised, influenced by the extreme wealth that globally poured into its market.¹ Some contemporaneous commentators (e.g. those emphasising the rise of 'post-modernism'²) recognised in this the declining hold of the modernist vision and its evolutionary account of art, discrediting any belief in a central authoritative account of canonical art. Art production became 'spatialized' into 'a range of possible styles' (Eagleton, 1985: 87) causing, eventually, the collapse 'of artistic and political dissensus' and the pauperisation of art as a meaningful form of resistance (Bishop, 2012: 28, in reference to Rancière). In this context, the demise of a public collective sphere as the sole alternative to free markets and the triumphalist ascendancy of neo-liberal ideology started to make clear the alignment between the individualism of artistic practice (inherent in its predilection for originality) and the needs of the capitalist market for continuous flows of new goods. As Boltanski and Chiapello (2006) emphasise, seeking new and innovative positions can be endogenised into a world driven by commercial innovation and the selling of new products. Thus what Chiang and Posner (2006) call the 'omniscience' of contemporary art – its ability to change meaning based on interpretation – seemed, in a world absolved of erstwhile certainties, to enable art to act as a 'positional good' for the super-rich without forfeiting a posture of critique of the capitalist system of which it is part.

The Rise of Inequality and the Impact on Artistic Critique

It is our contention that new critical resources are needed to respond effectively to the dynamics of the contemporary art world, where financialisation and potential investment returns on iconic works for a super-wealthy elite are changing art as an object and as a vehicle for radical expression. To be sure, the impact of wealth on processes of artistic production, consumption and institutionalisation are not new: these have always been inextricably linked to the availability and distribution of capital, and many public institutions have their roots in the collections of wealthy industrialists and aristocrats or were funded directly by them. However, whether the Gilded Age or the art market expansion of the 1980s, each such moment is differentiated by what differing social structures, wealth demographics, and art ecosystems brought to bear on the interaction between inequality and the art world. While the advent of mass markets and hyper-capitalist

culture drove the 1980s' expansion of the art market and the notion of investing in art saw tentative buy-in from niche parts of the private banking sector for the first time, finance had not yet penetrated every aspect of social life. Art and finance had not yet caught the imagination of myriad entrepreneurs, or engendered organisational departments and industry advocacy groups; and an ecosystem of art-related financial products had not been conceived (for example, the market for art-backed loans, which barely existed two decades ago, is now estimated at \$20–24 billion in loans outstanding; Deloitte and ArtTactic, 2019: 28). The technology did not exist to mine vast repositories of data on art transactions and artists with an ambition to systematise the art market and art investments. Similarly, while large contemporary galleries existed, they did not seek to put on museum shows, have restaurants and cafes on the premises, or compete on a global scale. Astronomical prices had been paid for artworks, but no one had paid over \$100 million for a living artist. Philanthropy thrived, but private museums with significant tax benefits and often suspect public benefit did not. Large museums were not building satellite museums and pushing their names as brands. The high-end contemporary art market was not yet truly globalised. There were not in excess of 2000 billionaires, with over US\$ 8 trillion dollars in wealth.

The implications for questions of production, display and representation of the growing interaction between wealth and the art market are therefore important (e.g. Upton-Hansen, 2018), and indeed existing research has evidenced the direct link between the two. In separate analyses, Goetzmann et al. (2011) and Botha et al. (2016) for example found a positive lagged relationship between stock-market performance and art price indexes. Consequently, noting the highly unequal participation in stock-market gains, art prices have been found to be widely impacted by economic inequality:

[B]uilding a regression on the income tax data of Atkinson and Piketty (2010), [researchers] show that 'art prices rise when income inequality goes up', with robust conclusions that a one percent increase in the share of total income earned by the top 0.1 percent triggers an increase in art prices of about 14 percent. (Goetzmann et al., 2011: 14–15, cited in Upton-Hansen, 2018: 106)

This follows the logic that higher inequality allocates additional resources to segments who will invest it or spend it on discretionary expenses, such as art. But while a 'rising tide' lifts all artworks, inequality also has more dramatic localised effects on the art world that fundamentally impact its politics.

Although there is significant variation between different parts of the world, there has been a major transfer of resources towards the 'top 1%'. The most recent World Inequality Report (Alvaredo et al., 2018), based on an exhaustive analysis of taxation records over the majority of the world's population shows that the top 1% took 27% of the entire growth of the world economy between 1980 and 2016 (also Piketty, 2020). The interest of such wealthy individuals in the art market is apparent from numerous studies (e.g. Schimpfössl, 2018) and is evident from the hammer prices (many times above the budgets of the best endowed public institutions) that are achieved at leading auction houses. Deloitte recently estimated the wealth associated with art and collectibles among individuals with assets in excess of US\$ 30 million (excluding their main residence) at a staggering US\$ 1.74 trillion (Deloitte and ArtTactic, 2019: 27).

Inequality thus prioritises the acquisition interests of the super-rich in the market and by extension in culture at large, giving greater representation in galleries and museums and assigning greater monetary value to the artists satisfying this demand. There are a number of mutually reinforcing dimensions here. First, there are ordinary demand-and-supply dynamics, by which demand for certain types of art will be satisfied by production meeting its basic requirements (for example iconicity, scale, etc.). To the extent that price is itself a feature of the art's value under conditions of 'pecuniary canons of taste', and insofar as the requirement of recognisability constrains the number of artists who can benefit from this demand, such demand will dramatically increase the prices for the small subset of artists for whose works super-rich buyers are competing (as they seek out artworks based on their 'positions in the world of taste'; Hutter and Shusterman, 2006: 195). It will also put pressure on that subset of artists to expand their production capacity, thereby accentuating the 'winner-takes-all' shape of the market (e.g. Zorloni and Ardizzone, 2016) and limit their experimentalism or the number of 'styles' in which they work.

Second, if inequality of wealth among buyers reproduces itself as inequality in the distribution of revenues among artists, it also generates inequality in the distribution of revenues among galleries representing such artists. Indeed the rise of an oligopoly of 'mega-galleries', the 'museumification' of galleries, and the emaciation of the mid-level gallery are frequently commented-upon phenomena in the art world. 'Mega-galleries', capturing the rewards of wealth inequality, have expanded into global empires with exhibition spaces in each of the world's metropolises rivalling those of its largest public museums.³ To fulfil the demands such spaces exert, artists build studios with anywhere from a dozen (Jeff Koons) to several hundred assistants (Damien Hirst), or outsourcing certain aspects of the execution of creative ideas to specialised third parties. Artists represented by such galleries will find available to them an exhibition platform that is magnitudes larger than what other artists have, and with far greater marketing resources. By dint of sheer visibility in the cultural field, these can create monetary value in the artworks of artists who, while lesser known or not critically recognised, are perceived to have the potential to satisfy the demand of a super-rich clientele. If a less unequal distribution of wealth among patrons would give resources to a wider array of collecting interests, then it follows that under current conditions, mega-galleries and their artists have appropriated resources otherwise available to a wider and more diverse set of artistic voices and practices, and otherwise allowing for more mid-market galleries to thrive.

Third, while certain galleries have prospered, the current austerity environment in the UK and elsewhere, having partly contributed to increases in wealth inequality via lower taxation, has conversely created a challenging economic environment for museums. These have faced a severe decline in public funding and therefore had to reorient their operations towards more revenue generating activities to substitute for this loss. Reductions in public funding have mirrored policies of indirect funding via tax-breaks for donors (rather than public funding from taxes collected), forcing institutions to conjure philanthropic largess among the world's ultra-rich and increasing their influence over public culture. Typically, billionaire philanthropy will privilege flagship expansions rather than maintenance and upkeep; endowing established branded institutions rather than smaller ones, with donations shaped by the requirements of their tax planning. Another source of

support comes from commercial galleries representing artists who museums plan to exhibit: museums can ask for financial or other contributions which well-capitalised galleries are inherently better predisposed to be able to do. Thus, the balance of economic incentives suggests curators should favour artists from the rosters of top galleries, artists who will have benefited directly or indirectly from the patronage of super-rich buyers (e.g. Pogrebin, 2016; Saltz, 2015). In 2015, *The Art Newspaper's* Julia Halperlin published research indicating that artists from five of the world's top galleries accounted for almost a third of solo museum shows in the US between 2007 and 2013.

Fourth, super-rich collectors can directly affect the curatorial programmes of major museums by lending or bequeathing their collections to them. Together with financial endowments, such philanthropic acts, where sufficiently large, may also generate opportunities for the donors to take positions as trustees on museum boards, once again magnifying the interests of this population segment in the system which selects, ratifies and displays the parts of our material culture that will be historically consecrated (this is particularly prominent in the US model). As Frey and Meier (2006: 1031) observe, donors can 'directly influence museum policy by interfering in the programming [e.g. as trustees], or they can set strictly binding constraints on the ways in which works they donate can be used'. Collectors have also been known to loan their art to museums in order to increase its value, before then auctioning it off (see Velthuis, 2014, on collector Bert Kreuk). Finally, where collectors have preferred to directly opt for the setting up of private museums, the overarching principle of such public displays remains the biographical embodiment of the patron.

Inequality also has wider ecosystem implications. By concentrating purchasing power in an ultra-narrow segment of the population, it has spurred an increase in the number and type of intermediaries and adjunct services available to this segment in the market. Thus, the art world may still be able to capture the same or more economic rewards overall, but these are distributed across very different agents, away from the lower- to mid-primary market and towards top galleries as well as art advisory, art data, collection management, art storage, and art and finance services. The latter in particular reflect attempts to systematise interactions in the market (notably pricing) and to shift the approach to buying, holding and selling artworks on the basis of an understanding of art as an asset. Inequality therefore creates the conditions for the seeping power of 'financialised' logics within the art market more broadly, shifting its structure and influencing the ways in which art is valorised, displayed and priced.

In retrospect, it is important to recognise how the advent of the third phase of subaltern artistic critique took place at the same time as the rise of finance capital and the growth of the art market. Critical multicultural, feminist, and post-colonial thinkers were criticising the autonomous logic of an exclusive and introverted art world, weakening its monopoly on cultural capital, at the very same time as the art market was opening up in an extraordinary – and highly publicised – commercial expansion. The success of the art market as an intermediary further destabilised the nexus of institutions and critics who in tandem established the cultural (and as a result, monetary) value of artists within closed artistic fields. This pincer movement on institutional cultural authority abetted the rise of mega-galleries, which in turn professionalised the collector–gallerist–artist relation. The greater distance of the parties in a transaction, the exclusion of the artist from a growing

sphere of art or art-related transactions, and the emergence of art market data subsequently produced a favourable environment for the detached rationality of finance to take hold as an organising principle.

Upton-Hansen (2018) traces how the notion of art as an investment was rationalised and made mainstream over the past half century. Among this story's key elements, he identifies the proliferation of new pricing algorithms (notably the hedonic price model); new structural elements like high-end freeports, collection management software, or art securities exchanges based on fractional ownership (notably through the use of blockchain technology); and new financial products such as art-backed loans and art investment funds, as constituting an ecosystem that has become entirely integrated into the art market. Demand for such products is consistent with Fligstein and Goldstein's (2015) detection since of an emergent 'financialised culture' (in American households), and Davis's (2009) identification of a new 'portfolio society', in which investment income has become the dominant exegetical lens. It also fits Chiapello's description of the 'financialisation of valuation': 'the ingraining of financialised metrics and reasonings in spaces and situations where they were previously non-existent or less common' (2014: 15).⁴ While the risk-adjusted returns to investing in art are lacklustre at very best (e.g. Charlin and Cifuentes, 2017; Korteweg et al., 2016), art has thus nevertheless proven susceptible to integration into financial rationale. While only 2% of buyers to date acquire for investment purposes alone, according to art professionals surveyed by Deloitte, 81% 'buy for collecting purposes but with an investment view' (Deloitte and ArtTactic, 2019: 79).

Tying these elements together is the central figure of the wealth manager, whose 'interpersonal privilege, financial expertise and perceived impartiality' (Upton-Hansen, 2018: 176) allows them to integrate art advisory into the overarching logic of individualised portfolio management and tax planning for the super-rich, very often across generations. In their 2019 Art & Finance Report, Deloitte noted that 72% of wealth managers surveyed now offered art-related services, while 81% of collectors surveyed wanted wealth managers to integrate art and collectibles into their wealth reports (Deloitte and ArtTactic, 2019: 27–28). As such it is through the market influence of collectors that the financial concerns of the super-rich, such as for rational organisation, risk control, capital protection or tax efficiency and succession, flow into and reshape the art sector. Inequality thus both increases its beneficiaries' ability to reap further rewards and extends itself into the structure of sectors most affected by their purchasing power, strengthening economic stratification and allowing for something like an 'inegalitarian spiral', as Piketty calls it (2014: 572), to take flight. At the same time, the treatment of art as an asset class introduces a powerful conservative force into an art market that is itself increasingly central to the definition of culture. Mining the past for lessons on the types of art that generate positive investment returns, treating art as an asset extends racial and gender biases of past collecting patterns into the future, stifling progressive politics by privileging the works of white male artists as more bankable.

The Emergence of an Institutional Politics of Place

The playing out of these three critiques is the platform to reflect on how contemporary institutional elites working in the arts addressed how they saw the challenge of

inequalities affecting their work. We initially sent out 52 interview invitations based on an online search of public and private galleries and museums across the UK, aiming to strike a balance between larger, prestigious/well-known and financially relatively well-equipped institutions in urban centres and smaller, less prominent ones in less central locations.

The institutions which followed our invitations then put us in touch with representatives they deemed most appropriate/well-placed to partake in the project. Some of these participants also referred us to additional respondents with whom we followed up by sending out interview invitations as well. We obtained 19 respondents by these invitations and we also gained five further interviewees through snowballing. Generally, bigger, more prominent and financially relatively well-placed institutions, both private and public, were keener to participate in the project than smaller galleries from which we received fewer replies. This probably reflects the strain on personnel, time and organisational resources that many smaller arts institutions face, but might also indicate how the challenge of inequality in its multiple dimensions poses itself with particular force to institutions which seek to occupy an established, legitimate position in (public) cultural life.

Our line of questioning began ‘we are (. . .) concerned with the significance of inequality – is this something which you see as a challenge for your work? If so, what kinds of inequality are of the greatest concern to you?’ This open-ended line of questioning generally led to a rich and engaged discussion, with interviews ranging from 30 to 90 minutes. We carried out semi-structured interviews that allowed respondents to account for themselves in an in-depth fashion while also generating comparative data across people’s different stakeholder profiles. Beyond asking questions around the impact of austerity politics and the increasing financialisation of art, we explored how economic issues interplay and deepen other forms of inequalities around gender, race and disability, colonial legacies and regional disparities. After transcribing the interviews, we manually coded them following protocols that inductively allowed themes in the data to emerge.

The stakes of elite interviewing need to be borne in mind. As Cousin, Khan and Mears (2018: 238) note, especially ‘[e]thnographic and interview-based accounts reveal performative cultures among elites: representations, motivations and justifications, often rife with contradictory views’. As amongst other elite researchers (Laurison and Friedman, 2019; McAndrew et al., 2020), we were struck by how it was a marker of an elite position to be highly reflexive about diversity and equality issues. It has been recognised how the institutionalisation of (self-)critique is ultimately used to strengthen the legitimacy of precisely the institutions targeted by that critique (e.g. Boltanski and Chiapello, 2006) and, connected therewith, of cultural elites. In their 2008 book *The Social Impact of the Arts: An Intellectual History*, Belfiore and Bennett (2008: 4) observe, for instance, that ‘[a] belief in the power of the arts to transform lives for the better represents something close to orthodoxy amongst advocates of the arts around the world’. Though always occupying a ‘fragile position in public policy’ because the claims made for art ‘are extremely hard to substantiate’, in the UK the New Labour government in particular promoted the role of arts in the new economy of the 1990s and early 2000s as contributing ‘to a range of governmental strategies that

included local economic development, place marketing and social inclusion' (Belfiore and Bennett, 2008: 5,7). Importantly, as Bishop points out, the position of art in New Labour's vision was also that it could usefully stimulate in people the spirit of creativity, 'to be entrepreneurial, embrace risk, look after their own self-interest, perform their own brands, and be willing to self-exploit', such as would be needed in an economy shifting from manufacturing to creative industries (Bishop, 2012: 15–16). Rather than addressing structural inequalities in the art world and beyond, such an approach re-integrates an economic rationale into the workings, measurements and support of arts and culture with potentially damaging effects for creatives working from the classed, raced and gendered margins of production.

This imprimatur certainly echoed across our respondents, who sometimes referred to art's ability to stimulate 'new ideas, or technological innovations' (director of a key contemporary art institution in London) and to ultimately enrich the contemporary cultural industries 'that come from design or arts in some way' (outreach manager at a major private gallery in London), thereby supporting the vitality of the economy. A broad belief in art's social potency clearly underpinned a number of responses. In particular from the vantage point of public institutions – 'we have a moral imperative *because* we are public', as the Access & Inclusion Manager at the National History Museum described it – a conception of a broad social function for the arts beyond the aesthetic was pervasive.

However, although these kinds of qualitative accounts are likely to generate justifications of how institutions are being effective, it is the mode in which these defences are mounted which is telling. Rather than attempting to defend autonomous art principles, they used market logic to contest the authority of the market as an overarching principle, so elaborating an implicit critique of longer-standing forces of capital accumulation. The version of elite reflexivity which we encountered frequently emphasised how the commercialisation of arts institutions allowed the arts to more powerfully be an irritant to these forces themselves – thus placing critique from 'within the belly of the whale' rather than from an autonomously constituted 'art world' standing in opposition to the market. If it is true that artworks, as a result of their circulation in the art market, cannot alone resist the 'increasing belief in the market's power of veridiction' (Chiapello, 2014), it also follows that the situated nature of artistic display can be used against market principles. More specifically, embracing the commercialised logic of 'audience shares' and 'demand', rather than some appeal to autonomous artistic principles of value – allowed elites to criticise in the names of downtrodden or marginalised arts consumers. By championing pushing the rules of artistic engagement away from an ethos in which internalist position-taking and novelty in the arts takes priority, they were able to mount a proactive and sustained critique of long-term processes of exclusion and marginalisation amongst their own audiences – real and potential. In this respect, they were keen supporters of the 'subaltern' critique, even though espoused from within their elite position.

One of the most arresting aspects of the accounts given by respondents was thus the desire to do the difficult work of engaging openly with local communities and addressing the skeletons in their institutional closets; work that emphasised how their institutions were not autonomous of their spatial surrounds. One aspect of this sensibility was that numerous respondents were happy to be named in our research (in which case they are mentioned specifically later in this article, otherwise they are presented in

anonymised forms), thus showing a preparedness to situate themselves. Their spatial sensitivity ranged from their present-day local neighbourhoods to the historical geographies of empire and trade of which some collections are a product. This grounding – at least in theory – subverts the universalising, placeless narratives of modernist culture, privileging specificity over high-minded abstraction, and de-globalising the institutional remit to address both concerns around representation and the highly localised impact of economic inequality. Such responses indicate a striking sensitivity to an *institutional politics of place*. We will outline three scopes within this register: the locality in relation to inclusiveness and outreach; specific present-day communities worldwide in relation to restitution and recognition; and historical geographies in relation to mapping institutional pasts. The ‘field of play’, as the director of the Manchester Art Gallery put it, operates in concentric circles.

Many of our respondents highlighted the importance of building long-term community relationships on a local scale as a primary means of generating interest among local audiences and increasing social inclusion and access. Several institutions had substantial free educational and outreach programmes and had recently created positions dedicated to such activities. As one respondent at a major cultural centre in London described it, ‘equality, inclusion, civic responsibility, these have been a priority focus for the past three years’. Relevant activities might include free talks, workshops, family-oriented events, partnerships with schools from disadvantaged areas in various parts of the country, partnerships with local schools and nurseries, relationships with community leaders, outreach to marginalised groups (the elderly, individuals with dementia), work on accessibility for the disabled, projects to support mental health, and projects to combat isolation and provide support structures for people who lack them. Often, access could in a first instance hinge on strategies as simple as creating auxiliary revenue-generating events to help keep exhibitions free or designing exhibitions to be less prescriptive, allowing audiences to explore their own resonances with the works on display. National museums in the UK make use of surveys to better understand their audiences and their motivations, and may gather additional data through interviews, audience-tracking and iterative exhibition design (using focus-groups) to calibrate exhibition design. Perhaps the most ambitious programme was outlined by the Manchester Art Gallery, with the director intending to reassert the museum’s position at the centre of civic life by encouraging its involvement in local matters of housing, urban planning or health programmes, and ultimately ‘introducing use-value back into art’. Indeed, in this case, the repudiation of the modernist ethos of art’s autonomy could not have been starker: ‘demodernising and decolonising that idea of art’ (which a post-Kantian, Romantic, Eurocentric mindset has kept alive for two centuries) was viewed as central to revitalising the critical space for culture. The institution should no longer be merely ‘representational’ but ‘operational’. A current project exemplifying this approach involves using the institution, in partnership with Manchester Business School, to explain how the economy works, how it could work in the future, and how it could be deconstructed. The funding of the exhibition would itself be part of its content.

Engaging communities also takes place at the level of exhibition programming and employment. At the level of exhibition programming the aim is of ‘generating new audiences that did not previously connect with the museum’, as one interviewee at the British

Museum put it, and perhaps creating new repeat visitors in the process.⁵ Strategies include targeted exhibitions, or the addition of art works produced by and/or representing communities that are under-represented in the existing collection (the National Portrait Gallery was a positive example of this; the new wing of the Museum of Modern Art in New York derives from similar thinking). A strategy of ‘relevant content’ can be surprisingly effective as indicated by a 2012 Hajj exhibition at the British Museum, which attracted an estimated 60% of BAME attendees, versus 3–4% for more traditional shows. Finally, as regards employment, the intention articulated by a number of our respondents was to achieve adequate representation at all levels of the staffing structure, on the basis that homogeneity in staffing inevitably reproduces itself as homogeneity in representation and organisational culture.⁶

Working with communities in these ways indeed involves recognising the cultural embeddedness of artistic production; the fact that the values embodied in and the value assigned to artworks are not perceived similarly across social groups. Certainly, the very fact of acknowledging this specificity itself, while pointing to the limits of artworks, also enables a much more powerfully political conversation to take place. As many of our respondents pointed out, the goal of art institutions would move from stimulating a mere enjoyment of various art forms to a critical engagement; that is to say, to agency. As the director of a major contemporary art institution in London put it, the idea is to give ‘tools to broader society for understanding the condition of the visual in a world that largely presents itself to us through the visual’, for understanding that representation is always ‘ideologically, economically, socially tainted’, and for understanding, therefore, that it can be changed. This exact point was echoed by the Manchester Art Gallery director who explained that given the ‘aesthetic incompetence’ of politicians, public institutions must teach aesthetic competence, particularly in aesthetically impoverished areas, with the democratic aim of ‘reempowering people in the aesthetic regime’.

Of course, although there is no doubting the integrity of our interviewees in presenting their grounded and self-reflexive conceptualisation of artistic critique, these do not necessarily translate into equally critical outcomes, institutional change or social transformation. In fact, as many scholars of diversity and inclusion strategies in the cultural industries have emphasised, the integration of progressive ideas into standardised institutional workings – especially within an elite context – often ends up strengthening social hierarchies rather than disrupting them (e.g. Banks, 2019; Gray, 2016; Saha, 2018). This is especially pertinent in the case of raced, classed and gendered divisions which have been deeply entangled with structures of artistic production and consumption in the West. In this context, it is precisely by presenting themselves as open, critical and meritocratic that cultural institutions might be able to (re)gain social legitimacy and (re)position themselves as cultural taste-makers (e.g. Lena, 2019). As Herman Gray (2016) and Anamik Saha (2018) further caution, by focusing merely on issues of representation and the development of new audiences, art organisations might divert their attention away from more fundamental approaches to institutional and social change, such as reorganising the structures of funding and ownership in the production of culture. To harness its disruptive potential, an institutional politics of place would therefore need to be taken seriously as a profound rethinking of standardised workings of cultural production and consumption.

These tensions also manifest themselves in a key dimension of the institutional politics of place; namely, rethinking institutional relationships in the context of restitution and post-colonial critique of empire. Here, the process of local community outreach and creation of feedback mechanisms for audiences can lead to profound reassessments of identity and past by institutions that were established in different historical periods, involving much wider geographies. Museums encounter in a particularly acute way the continuing impact of past inequalities, particularly imperial relations in which the cultural heritage of large parts of the world has been concentrated in the museums of wealthy countries, many of whom were colonial powers. Indeed, the public and political debate is increasingly influenced by an important discourse about restitution, which flows from a range of ethical issues relating to cultural heritage and its relationship with human beings' sense of identity and, in important part, from post-colonial sensibilities (e.g. Barringer and Flynn, 1998; Chambers et al., 2014; Simpson, 1997). The latter have inspired sophisticated arguments for reparation which emerge from a 'politics of recognition' (Taylor, 1994), which is of parallel importance to justice in distribution. This emerging politics of recognition has partly resulted in, across a number of spheres, extensive practices of apology and an expanded conception of what counts as meaningful recompense for past injustices.

Within the museum world of the Global North, debates regarding representation have hinged on the responsibility which comes with holding collections for the benefit of the public and on trust for future publics. In the case of the 'encyclopaedic' museums like the British Museum, the Louvre and the Metropolitan Museum in New York, these publics are not only local and national but also, importantly, global. This responsibility has focused on organising the display of and access to the collections so as to contribute to the due recognition – indeed celebration – of diverse and intermingled material cultures and their centrality to human evolution and to the quests for knowledge and meaning-making which are central to human life. Key issues have included improving access to collections, for example through the use of digital strategies and the expansion of facilities for visitors and researchers; educational outreach; international training schemes aiming to share skills such as archaeological, conservation and museological expertise; the building of relationships with source communities, including their involvement in shaping display; an expanded practice of loans and of reciprocal institutional relationships, particularly with new or expanding museums; a greater transparency about provenance in the way in which collections are displayed within a contextualised narrative; and a commitment to exploring, through the understanding, development and display of material cultures, how social, economic and political inequalities have been constructed, sustained and indeed challenged (e.g. Dewdney et al., 2013).

It is possible to read the elite rhetoric around restitution as institutional window dressing. For instance, there is still a striking unwillingness on the part of major public museums to earnestly consider the repatriation of cultural goods purloined during colonialism. There continues to be a reluctance to embrace a systematic approach to a politics of restitution and indigenous rights, rather than focusing on case-by-case decisions (e.g. Kuprecht, 2014). For a politics of place to profoundly address the legacies of empire and colonialism, institutions will need to take an active part in the advocacy for legal, political and economic investments in processes of repatriation and restitution.

Yet for all this, the seriousness of this thinking should not be underestimated, and has far reaching implications. The work undertaken by museums to address historical inequalities by reconnecting them with their institutional pasts has been extended to consider how forms of extraction are also evident within the UK. The Head of the Courtauld Gallery, for instance, expressed an interesting concern to bring art to those areas where Samuel Courtauld's businesses were located:

We have recently set up a programme of regional partnerships with museums in towns and cities where Courtauld's businesses used to have a big textile manufacturing presence. So, the idea is that we are sending pictures back to the places where money was made that allowed our founder to buy these things; so really major loans – again Cézannes and Modiglianis – that are going to Coventry and Hull and Preston and Belfast and so on.⁷

In general, travelling exhibitions, such as from London to regional museums within the UK, were embraced as a way of countering the gravitational pull of the capital on resources but also of recognising the links to places and times far beyond the capital that are embedded in these collections. Moreover, such exhibitions could be designed to be semi-structured, allowing regional museum curators to tailor them and add to them works of local relevance, in concert with their own outreach programmes (an example was the British Museum's *Desire, love, identity: exploring LGBTQ histories*, which went to three other museums).

Conclusion

We have shown that elites in art institutions mostly did not view their role as one of supporting economic regeneration, helping mould the modern worker, participating in the marketplace of global museum brands, or advancing national economic growth in a global capitalist world. They articulated a strong awareness of multi-dimensional inequalities, which the current economic model has driven both within and outside the art world. We have argued that this vision is focused around an emergent institutional politics of place. Pitted against abstract notions of art's passive benefits and against a finance-driven, globalised contemporary-arts culture – even, or especially, as they were forced to reckon with these realities in their funding structures – institutions were instead found to be grappling with the difficult work of addressing local social justice issues, educational impoverishment, social inclusion, and returning to an older civic function of mass moral instruction and emotional literacy. In addition, in trying to recuperate a moral leadership position, institutions were also found to be taking seriously issues of social representation (in their staffing, collection and audience), colonial or exploitative legacies, and restitution.

This emergent politics in the art world takes a very different form from previous critiques. Rather than reacting against economic and commercial pressures by insisting on purist aesthetic principles, it uses the very 'worldliness' which is central to the financialising of the art world to locate art interventions and the work of art institutions in the geographies and experiences of those who have been disadvantaged and dispossessed. Rather than succumb to a depthless postmodern pastiche, the meaning of art is deepened by historically and geographically 'placing' it. Such strategies can

serve to directly draw attention to the way that particular sites have been consecrated (as 'elite' galleries) and seek to trace different kinds of affiliations and ties that challenge these repertoires.

The discourses of cultural elites, which self-interestedly play a market game of seeking to expand demand for their services therefore do this in the name of challenging exclusivity on numerous dimensions. This emergent politics therefore seeks to reconfigure artistic critique within a commercialised institutional politics. It does this in part by recognising how trammelled artistic production and display is by commercial considerations and by immersing art in its context to argue for its repositioning as a fully historical and geographically grounded force. It hinges on the possibility of taking advantage of the worldly embeddedness of art and art institutions to reposition them within a broader project of social and economic equity. In some respects, this echoes aspects of romantic critique in wishing to reclaim different kinds of sites to those of commercialised modernity. However, this current is also profoundly unromantic in that its 'politics of place' does not celebrate an idyllic pre-capitalist arena but recognises how contestation, power and erasure are ubiquitous and pervasive within the current system. This is a sophisticated repertoire that involves institutions foregrounding historical claims and critical legacies; righting historical wrongs embedded in their institutional pasts; and engaging in an expansive form of 'stakeholder management' with various communities locally and transnationally.

To a certain extent, this approach mirrors conceptualisations like 'community arts' of the 1980s and, later, 'participatory arts', which saw art as a tool of community mobilisation, solidarity, resistance and critique. However, the accounts we have discussed show that this approach goes beyond fringe art movements, within society's principal vehicles for the intermediation of culture and the perpetuation of elite taste themselves. Here, we argue, a different conception of institutional responsibility is being articulated, moving beyond passive tolerance of radical politics towards an active mediation of the political potential of culture, a role that can only be meaningfully undertaken by addressing their own institutional histories, historical complicity in oppression, and biases at the level of collections and staffing. This comes with the hope that such a self-critical, inward-looking perspective will allow for long-standing inequalities to be articulated and addressed in specific, localised terms. In this sense, the 'politics of place' is far from the local ecosystem focus of the post-Bilbao approach, where museums were viewed as tools for cultural regeneration, urban development, tourism, and the spurring of innovation and entrepreneurship. Instead, the 'politics of place' embraces the power of cultural institutions – as platforms for the augmentation of cultural voices and issues – to shape conversation and action around economic equity, representation and social justice, rather than to drive economic growth.

We were struck that the geographical dimension is so formidable, with institutions rethinking their own historical and contemporary specificities, which are inevitably localised, as a way of subverting universalising frames that conceal dominant power structures. By being able to bring into conversation concerns around representation with a critical recognition of locally specific manifestations of economic inequality, we argued that such a focus on spatiality opens up a promising approach to reconsidering artistic critique and to addressing contemporary inequalities in the art world.

To some extent, this can be seen as a reformulation of a critical civic function for museums which harks back to mid-19th and early 20th-century social ideologies more than to the triumphalist futurism of the post-war era. This historical renewal is not surprising: what Piketty shows after all is that inequality today is as high as it was precisely in that period. Moreover, what we have called the politics of place has a rich intellectual history, including in the historical tensions between ‘international styles’ and the vernacular in architecture, whether in response to the ‘genius loci’ or to the specific histories of borough, city, or region (e.g. Douglas Crimp’s (1983) ‘critical regionalism’). What was unique, was the pragmatic and practical focus – the responsible realism – that defined ambitions rooted in the politics of place. While articulated missions were often wide-ranging in scope, there was a definite sense that the arts cannot act as a mere palliative to systemic economic problems. As the artist Grayson Perry pithily remarked: ‘You can give to people all the arts festivals in the world but that is not gonna give them a better house and a better job’. The immersion of arts institutions into the commercial world thus has the paradoxical effect of empowering institutional elites to contest economic and instrumental force in the name of geographical and historical specificity.

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Notes

1. This concern was preceded by the Frankfurt School’s critique of the cultural industries, most famously represented by Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1997 [1944]).
2. See Bell (1972), Harvey (1989), Jameson (1991), Bauman (various, but see e.g. Bauman, 2000).
3. See, for instance, David Zwirner, Hauser & Wirth or the recent expansion of Pace Gallery.
4. Chiapello (2014: 27) sees the reframing of cultural policy in terms of support for economic development goals in the European Union as part of this ‘colonisation’ by financial reasoning, going hand-in-hand with the ‘blurring of the boundaries between for-profit and non-profit activities’ and the ‘non-differentiation of the artistic, the innovative and the creative’.
5. Indeed, the motivations were not always purely altruistic. As one of our interviewees put it, ‘to me it is a no-brainer that there is also a business case in outreach’.
6. See Davies and Shaw (2010) on the lack of ethnic diversity in the UK museum workforce and O’Brien et al. (2016) on workforce inequality in the UK creative industries more generally.
7. He also spoke movingly about the long-term economic shifts that underpin, to some extent, contemporary forms of inequality: ‘Did you see photos of the Courtauld factories in Flintshire Wales? Enormous places . . . all of them have gone and when you go, it really strikes you.’

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