Institutionality as Enlightenment

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If men wish to be free, it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce.

—Hannah Arendt
Institutionality as power

There is a tender spot, it might be said, for many of us who work with institutions of art, a spot that is not always given its full due. When we are being tough-minded—rigorously analytical, detached from the sympathies of our day-to-day intercourse with familiar people and things, and self-reflexive about the larger social and political conditions of our enterprise—suspicions about our institutions often exceed our appreciation. In this state of mind many of us are inclined to view archives, libraries, internet repositories, museums, galleries, auction houses, personal collections, academic
organizations, and even our precious institution of art itself, with Pierre Bourdieu, say, or particularly with Michel Foucault and the broad sweep of his influence, as nodes within a “general system.” When we see art institutions in this systemic way they take on a life beyond any individual repository and the peculiarities of its people and things. In so doing, the measure of their institutionality shifts from the vertical rule of theological or philosophical understanding, ceremonial sites or sacred things, and meaningful personal relationships or moving aesthetic experience, to the horizontal jurisdiction of complex systems.

“The archive,” as this corpus mysticum is sometimes referred to generically, is understood to be a mix of social structure and cultural form that organizes knowledge in a manner that governs, delimits and directs the kind of insights we gather and pleasures we enjoy, and all largely below the level of our cognition, or at least below the level we admit to publicly. Regardless of whether we are referring to the economy of art, its bureaucracy, epistemology or cultural value, the foundational metaphor for such horizontalist accounts is Adam Smith’s invisible hand. In this way, art and its institutions are gauged by disembodied technical and systemic criteria that promote ends outside of any individual intention and at a remove from any particular use, ends at a remove from the vertical authority of theology and philosophy, ceremony and sacred sites, human bonds and aesthetic experience.

When we are thinking like Bourdieu or Foucault, in other words, the archive is first and foremost a distinctly modern ideological tool used to exercise power and accumulate wealth and we understand it in the larger socio-symbolic and socio-affective ways that Foucault intended with terms like discourse, or governmentality or, of course,
archive itself. The general system of file cabinets and file folders, databases and search engines, objects and definitions, auctions and appraisals, etc. serves to route the horizon of possible understanding from desire to thingliness, from the root condition of subjects to that of objects. The archive, this line of thought assumes, is a kind of imagined community of things and understanding beyond the horizon of our direct cognition and it polices its own boundaries and controls access to authority in all the ways that any secret society does, that is, not only through procedural means of enforcement but also by less structured, less conscious cultural means.

To call on one example that suggests this general delimiting effect on our experience, we might agree to Allan Sekula’s simple but expressive phrasing when he wrote of the archive’s “dry compartmentalization.” Or we might call to mind any tawdry nineteenth-century image of police files, museum storehouses, or any of the sundry typologies of scientists, philosophers, or medical researchers, and say that the dryness of these forms of organization is itself illustrative of a general and comprehensive system of understanding both conscious and unconscious, that is, of an “episteme” in Foucault’s capacious sense, or of “doxa” in Bourdieu’s. The Assyrian scribes’ careful tally of severed heads in Figure 1 can serve to illustrate the pre-history of this institutionalized knowledge and its taste. Their record-keeping is prehistorical and premodern for our purposes only because it is still visible as power, still done at the decree of a political leader and thus is not yet elemental enough to fall below the horizon of the political proper and function simply as knowledge, or in Foucault’s terminology “power/knowledge.”
Indeed, I think we can further say that when it comes to theorizing the archive (if not, as I will argue below, when it comes to working in it) some variety of this tough-minded Bourdieuianism or Foucauldianism, explicit or otherwise, is not only ingrained in us as critics and scholars but even holds true as a naive but nonetheless fully habituated knee-jerk response for most of our students. Such classroom reaction may be just one more garden variety of the best sort of sophomoricism—no different in kind from knee-jerk connoisseurship, say, or knee-jerk identity politics, or knee-jerk philosophizing—but that makes it no less symptomatic. Think, for example, of how a typical undergraduate student might respond if asked to explain why one artwork deserves to be in a museum and another does not: part of her may be itching to invoke justifications like “masterpiece,” “genius,” and “creativity,” but if my experience holds true what will come out instead is some intuitive version of the Foucauldean conjoining of knowledge and power or a naïve but nonetheless fully workable version of the one-upmanship argument laid out by Bourdieu in his 1979 *Distinction*. Understandably enough, my students have occasionally brought this argument to bear by asking about the role that professionals like us play in the amassing of wealth, power, and prestige by our superiors.

The organization of objects and information in archives, as in museums, as in any institution, such students would invariably say if the vocabulary were available to them, in other words, is a function of a “habitus” or a “regime’ of truth” and, like any regime, it has its rulers and its ruled, its structure of power and its domination, exploitation and exclusion. It is a system of organization driven by the pursuit of its own perpetuity and it is precisely its “dry compartmentalization”—into periods and isms, into media and movements, into artists’ names and their influences and legacies, into good art and bad,
into our taste and theirs—that empowers it. Taste, they would certainly say even if they
don’t really want to believe it, is a top-down organizing system dictated by collectors and
curators, critics and scholars, and institutions like museums, universities, libraries,
archives, galleries and private collections, or it is a matter of posing oneself against that
system. It is professionals like us who endow taste with its social value, not anything
intrinsic to the artwork itself much less intrinsic to the aesthetic experience it offers.4
Beyond this regime of truth and the battles against it, they might say if pressed to find a
non-constructionist value for taste, all that remains is that beauty which resides in the eye
of the beholder, the delectation of personal preference, “taste” in its most banal,
consumerist sense: Manet over Monet, say, or abstraction over figuration, or, for that
matter, latte over cappuccino—you the art appreciator, momentarily divorced from your
workaday role as tough-minded critical historian, sophomoric cynic, or heartless banker-
cum-arts-patron, decide which better strikes your leisurely mood or shopaday fancy.

Such, we might risk, has been the institution of art’s default theory of
institutionality for a long time now, at least when it is asked to actively characterize such
a theory or even when it more passively assumes one. What makes it particularly
appealing to scholars, however, is something greater still, or at least closer to home: the
archive for our purposes is less some “‘regime’ of truth” out there—in government
buildings, say, that we abide from a distance—as it is a regime in here, in museums, or
research institutes, or art magazines, or art history lecture halls and textbooks. As the
generic undergraduate response would suggest, our Foucauldian theory of the archive
and our Bourdieuan theory of taste also define a limit condition for our scholarship, a
moment when its capacity to understand is reduced to all the abject poverty and brute,
instrumental authority of “dry compartmentalization.” To put this in more common parlance, the threshold of art history and related humanistic forms of study is the moment they are reduced to “thinking in boxes,” the moment they are reduced to the form of thinking of the bureaucrat rather than the leader, the form of thinking that aims at ensuring the continuity of the institution that endows him or her with an authority that has nothing to do with the object in question. So it is that this limit has little to do with the content of any specific piece of the archive but instead mostly with the way in which knowledge is organized, the way in which thoughts or statements relate to each other, the way in which art history’s periods and isms and all the rest of it function as a self-reproducing, self-justifying system of relations; the way, in other words, that our knowledge is our power.

But such Foucauldian or Bourdieuan worries and temptations really only represent half of any art-oriented scholarly relation to the archive—the theoretical half, we might call it, the workaday or shopaday half, the mind half rather than the body half, the half that thinks in terms of social systems and marketplace calculations rather than in terms of the fullness of human sensuous experience. We can also consider how we have used the archive rather than how we have conceptualized it, how we engage with it as practitioners rather than as theorists. Foucault himself, for example, was never one to simply document conquest, never one to simply use archival knowledge as an index and agent of power, even balefully. Instead, like many of his contemporaries who came of age with the 1960s, he saw the information he gathered from the archive as a means of contesting power, a means of challenging the system of thinking in boxes and its role reproducing and entrenching the powers that be. Indeed, if the slogan drawn from
Foucault’s *theory* of the archive is “knowledge as power” (or, in the more constricted form already introduced that makes clear the fully intractable, systemic character of the relation, “power/knowledge”), then the slogan drawn from Foucault’s archival *practice* as a historian would be better given as something very different, something more like “speaking truth to power.” Something similar, of course, could be said about Bourdieu.

This second slogan makes sense immediately to any reader of Foucault, I think it is fair to say, but it poses a problem for his theory insofar as it gives autonomy to truth, insofar as it gives some breathing room by which it can separate itself from power, by which it can make itself an actor in its own right. This, we might say, is simply a slippage in Foucault’s account, a slippage between his theory and his practice and a slippage between the sense of control over the object world that “knowledge” indicates and the sense of grounded conviction that the term “truth” conveys. For example, we can see this slippage when he said that his goal was “not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power (which would be a chimera, for truth is already power),” stoutly reaffirming the power/knowledge (cum power/truth) doctrine in the first half of his sentence, “but,” continuing in the second, it is a matter “of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates.”

It is this “power of truth” detachable from the power proper of “the forms of hegemony,” the moment in which the tight power/knowledge nexus that Foucault postulates is sundered and a space opens up between hegemony and some emergent counter-hegemony, between a “regime of truth” and truth proper, the moment of the possibility of speaking truth to power before that truth is realigned, that will concern me
in what follows. That is, it is here in that split nexus that we might find what I am calling the tender spot of art history’s relation to the archive.
The tender spot

To get at this distinction between truth in the form knowledge/power and truth as a form of knowledge separable from power we might focus first on the term “archive” itself. There are two commonly used meanings—one that carries forward from antiquity and the other that has its roots in the Enlightenment. The older meaning, archive in its noun form, is, generally, the referent when we use the term in its Foucauldian sense as I have been describing it here. Most minimally conceived it is no different from any database, any rational ordering system, any self-enclosed systematic form of knowledge or value, any thinking in boxes. The later meaning, archive in its verb form, is different:
on the one hand, of course, it means simply to place an object in an archive but, more importantly, on the other hand, it also indicates a change of status for the object, a movement from an active database to an inactive one, a downgrading of importance, a movement from the category of the present to the category of the past, a movement into attic or basement or offsite where the object is preserved for some indeterminate future use. This idea was first developed in the national archive established in Paris in 1789 and then formalized further in 1796 after debate about whether to keep the records of the old regime or destroy them but the modern idea of the archive as a public repository of the nation’s past maintained for future reinterpretation is inconceivable without the concept of progress as it had already been developed prior to the revolution in the Enlightenment.

To recall what this idea meant for the emerging concept of the archive we can look to the Marquis de Condorcet, writing just prior to the revolution: “No one has ever believed that the mind can gain knowledge of all the facts of nature,” he wrote, arguing that we do, however, make great advances in understanding by learning “how to classify them and to subsume them under more general facts.” This gain does not result from an evolution of physiological capacity—the development of bigger or more elastic brains, say—but instead through the development of social systems: the “strength and limits of man’s intelligence may remain unaltered,” he continued, but the “language that fixes and determines his ideas will acquire greater breadth and precision.” This, we might say, is a notion of the compartmentalization of knowledge that pledges not to become dry or static, that pledges not to become institutionalized as such, an understanding of knowledge, in other words, that pledges to retain its humanity. The prophylactic warding
off of the implicitly anticipated problem of dryness, the problem of thinking in boxes, the problem of power realized through the stasis of epistemes, was thus given in the Enlightenment ideal of progress, in the idea that the method of compartmentalization—that is, of knowledge itself or fixing and determining meaning in order to master it—would change or open out to be ever more refined, more nuanced and generative of understanding. In the future, it was assumed, we will be better able to understand the past and so holding on to raw data—archiving it—serves as an investment in this promise, as an investment in the idea that meaning of any given archival object can, in principle, forever be contested, revised, expanded upon, and better understood.

Archive in its verb form, thus, refers not to the process of fixing and determining meaning, of enacting the connection of truth and power in Foucault’s sense, but instead the opposite, that is, to the process and the promise of unfixing meaning, of detaching truth from power. This is the tender spot we hold for the archive and it is something we experience all the time: it was made available when the more sober forces of the French revolutionary government preserved the documents of the old regime and made them public and it is what happens when a government document now becomes declassified or a private document is given over to a public archive. To archive in its Enlightenment sense, thus, is inextricably linked to the promise of detaching truth from the exclusive domain of power by moving it from the realm of private discretion into the realm of public judgment where it invites reexamination and reinterpretation, where it waits to take on a new attachment to power, in significant measure through the work of scholars like us. Of course, this detachment is itself something that is granted by power but it is done so for a reason—that is, it speaks of a moment where the archival document is no
longer of immediate use and concern to power, or the moment when the document has become obsolete, the moment it has become history in its yet-to-be written sense. This does not mean that it will not take up a relation to power again as it enters into history books and the like, but for the moment it has all the potential of the “power of truth,” as Foucault termed it, and not what we Foucauldians might call the truth of power.

Such an archive-specific status for a piece of information in between its life and its afterlife, in between its original attachment to power in business or politics or museology and its later attachment in emergent historical understanding, as an expression of the politics of the author or publisher or reader, can also be said to be evident in the form of the archive. The archival organization of knowledge has a distinct structure. It is typically given little or no narrative or other instrumental organization—it may be roughly chronological or maybe not, correspondence maybe separated from manuscripts and business documents or maybe not: it doesn’t really matter—and instead is organized mostly by simple accretion. The archive lines up one scrap of information after another, after another, with no single part valorized over any other. As such any given piece of information is at base a serial form, an equivalent form, and remains so until extracted, revalorized and elevated to the status of historical consequence. The smoking gun is not pre-given by the archival form—it is not framed, or placed on a pedestal, or put at the center of a narrative reconstruction of events—but instead is there only to be discovered as such.

This active, extractive role made possible by the archive was summed up nicely in 1971 by Noam Chomsky as he debated and distinguished himself from Foucault for Dutch television:
I’m looking at history not as an antiquarian, who is interested in finding out and giving a precisely accurate account of what the thinking of the seventeenth century was—I don’t mean to demean that activity, it’s just not mine—but rather from the point of view of, let’s say, an art lover, who wants to look at the seventeenth century to find in it things that are of particular value, and that obtain part of their value in part because of the perspective with which he approaches them.

And I think that, without objecting to the other approach, my approach is legitimate; that is, I think it is perfectly possible to go back to earlier stages of scientific thinking on the basis of our present understanding, and to perceive how great thinkers were, within the limitations of their time, groping toward concepts and ideas and insights that they themselves could not be clearly aware of.9

The archive is not simply a record and process of enforcing the will to power, it is also a record and process open to that desire which speaks truth to power. In this regard, the archive of Foucault’s own writings could itself be taken to be a repository of such desire—“Connecting together modes of veridiction, techniques of governmentality, and practices of the self is basically what I have always been trying to do,” as he himself put it—even if, with Chomsky, they stand for a desire necessarily understood to be bound by the limitations of its time, a desire unable to fully channel the point of view of the art lover because of its investment in “finding out and giving a precisely accurate account” of the past.10
One way to further consider the value of the art lover’s desire for art history is to look to the archive as a concern for art practice. There have been a variety of different ways that art has taken on the archive as a method but, generally, we might speak of just two: first, there is the aim to articulate and preserve a certain relation to the world, such as we might see in the work of Karl Blossfeldt. This function is different from documenting the world, reporting on it or commenting on it—instead it seeks to preserve a connection to the world through a process of making aesthetic judgments. Witness, for example, his manifesto: “the plant,” he said famously, “must be valued as a totally artistic and architectural structure.” The particular mix of aims at issue here—preserving and knowing realized through a process of idealization—is crucial: this is what makes it art and not something else. Its valorization is drawn not through simple cognition but instead through a process of lingering over the object, spending time with it, savoring the nuance and character of its “totally artistic and architectural” form, seeing it as an object of love or desire, and preserving it for later gratification.

Something like this always true for art, at least when it is functioning as art qua art and not serving some other role: it makes its claim on the beholder as attachment, not as reason. This is patent when we look at photographs like Blossfeldt’s that contain some ambivalence about their status as art, photographs that easily cut either way, asking us, on the one hand, to read them as if we were plant scientists of one variety or another, or, on the other hand, to indulge in them for the purpose of visual pleasure, to relish the perfection of their formal resolution as if they were themselves art or architecture. Blossfeldt’s planned but never-completed archive was to be a kind of treasure-chest of jewels, a selection of the best and the brightest. In the sense that I have been using it here,
thus, “archive” is really not the right word—the word “collection” might be better, or maybe even “museum.”

The second and more fitting general way in which we might consider the archive as a basis for artistic form and the art lover’s desire, a way more proper to the notion of the archive as it is used here, is to consider the objects contained as not being special, not being the best and brightest of their type. What is loved in this use of the archive as artistic ideal is not the exceptional status of the archival objects but instead their generic quality, their equivalence from one to the next and the next and the next. The question that this poses to us is why, or, rather, what? What is the appeal of serial form when the units are not laid out in a progressive narrative order or in a system of comparison for distinguishing good from bad, ideal from less ideal, but instead are allowed their full equivalence as undifferentiated units within a larger structure? There is a kind of default answer to this question assumed in the literature, one that is certainly correct—that is, that the aesthetic charge of serial form draws on the power of mechanical reproduction, or, even more so, draws on the commodity form to work against an older notion of art as the experience of ideal form. Seriality in this industrial and capitalist sense is anti-aestheticist but that does not make it without aesthetic power or consequence of its own.

To appreciate that power and consequence, we can look back to the nineteenth-century’s continuation (rather than its corruption or falsification) of the Enlightenment and consider the “secret,” as Marx called it, of the “universal equivalent form” or the “value-form of the commodity.” Marx’s invocation of secrecy, like the invisibility of Adam Smith’s invisible hand, was a way to say that labor had been rendered disembodied and systemic by the market’s calculus of exchange and thereby detached or alienated
from the laborer. Marx’s account is the root form of our own tough thinking, just as it is for Foucault and Bourdieu, but it is also different in that he owns up to—and incorporates into his theory—a tender spot, or, to sharpen my metaphor with something even more fleshy, a soft underbelly. Marx insisted that the reducibility of labor to the universality of the commodity—its becoming discursive, dryly compartmentalized, nothing more than power/knowledge—is inseparable from the cultural development of the abstract universal concept of “human equality,” a concept that, for our purposes, was formalized in theory by the Enlightenment and, in a limited political sense, in practice by the French revolution. What we experience in the seriality of the commodity, in other words, is not just alienation but also enlightenment in the abstract form of equivalence, the abstract form of universality, carrying its own substantial aesthetic charge.

This is an ideal very different from the exquisite perfection of Blossfeldt’s plant photographs. Both approaches abstract from particulars, but instead of that abstraction essentializing through synthesis or distillation in Blossfeldt’s quasi-scientific manner, the commodity abstracts into generic equivalence. The soft underbelly of the commodity form, the Enlightenment promise that human equality is realizable through the production of knowledge and understanding, through the power of reason, that is, through the work of art historians and others like us, is, in this way, the appeal of the archive. This is its beauty—it must be called—the beauty that inheres in its form. We might refer to it as the “archival ideal” and situate it opposite to, dialectically or otherwise, Foucault’s account of archival control. The tender spot for art history, thus, resides in that moment of meaningfulness embodied in the archive that has not yet attained determination, the moment in which meaningfulness might still be found in any one or another of an
archive’s boxes or bins or folders (as suggested by the image of Walter Benjamin working illustrated as Figure 2) or in any one or another of a museum’s many objects. It is that moment in which truth is still detached from power waiting to take on new social authority, the moment of epistemological innocence, the moment when the dream of progress in all its original Enlightenment glory becomes available through the thoughtful inquiry of scholars like Foucault or Chomsky or us.
Institutionality as enlightenment

Generally speaking, modern art and art historical inquiry alike have always been about this tender spot. But when it is only that—just the soft underbelly of the commodity form, the point at which the commodity glimpses its unalienated humanity, the moment that it feels the presence of another possible world—then it is only unrealized potential. In this sense modern art has almost always been largely horizontal even if it has been organized around a distant and forever unrealized dream of verticality, always an anarchism that dreams of socialism, always an art that yearns to become life, always a form of ad hoc sociality pinned to a misty fantasy of institutional form that would rescue it from the glittering but dreary asociality of the market.
When we allow ourselves to experience the fraught distance between desire and its object that this horizontality conjures, as one deep-feeling, critically-minded art lover reports, the emotional consequence can be intense:

The disenchantment of the world is horrible, intolerable. Any mass movement or cult figure that promises a way out of it will be clung to like grim death. Better even fascism than technocracy: there is a social id in most of us that goes on being tempted by that proposition.11

This is just to say what we’ve always known: capitalism produces alienation—it represses the social id that resides in most (but perhaps not all) of us—when it does not find overt expression in a corresponding political ideal such as democracy or fascism and instead exercises its authority on the technocratic level of social management that Foucault and Bourdieu detailed.

The history of modern art is largely a history of manifesting that alienation as symptom just as the history of modern art history has often been a matter of finding purpose in that symptom as art. The fundamental critical question is really to what degree this repressed social id might realize itself, not in the rootedness of identity as clan, nation, mob, or Übermensch, but instead with the extensity of transparent and universal algorithms in an anti-technocratic system. At the moments when this desire is allowed to arise as a design problem it moves from the dingy archives back into the open air of public life. Modernist artistic programs that brought the social id to the surface as a design problem rather than a symptom—think of the Bauhaus, for example, or Constructivism and De Stijl—and social programs that realize such designs—like universal suffrage, healthcare, pension, and education—have their limits, for sure, but
they do bring to the fore the great promise of abstraction. The only alternative to approaching the world in such a formal, forward-looking, institutionally minded way is to leave the sociality of desire to spontaneous or ad hoc origination, the kind of social being that first emerges as micropolitical sovereignty but eventually cements itself in the habituated prejudices of identity and place. Without the institutionalized abstraction of universality, social design sinks below the horizon of visibility into a fetid private dominion of elders, experts, and the economy’s invisible hand casting the rest of us into a circumscribed and epiphenomenal public sphere of culture.

Putting the same concern differently, we might ask to what degree is our social id allowed to realize its aims as Chomsky’s art lover? That is, to what degree are we permitted to address the world at large in ways that our desire recognizes itself in a higher purpose—justice, say, or freedom, or belonging, or beauty, or truth—and to what degree are we forced to turn that desire back in on itself where it finds expression only as simple desublimation, simple refusal, simple retreat from a world defined by power/knowledge, into the restricted immediacy of individual embodiment, cultures of taste, and temporary local evasions of the power/knowledge nexus?

The threat of system—of discourse, governmentality, and episteme, say, or of field, habitus, and doxa, or of all that falls under the broad sweep of technocracy—has always stood over and against individual, embodied autonomy, and local cultural formations. Modern art has routinely responded in kind not only with critique but also with one version or another of bodily superabundance aimed at exceeding its threat or giving expression to that threat as symptom. Those that have described, analyzed, and
expressed that threat are legion—Foucault and Bourdieu not the least among them—but here is another that brings our current epoch of computer conventions to the fore:

The world is totally confused—everyone uses the word “technology” for PACKAGES AND CONVENTIONS—like email, Windows, Facebook, the World Wide Web. These all use technologies but are themselves just collections of design decisions somebody made without asking you. I see humanity as unknowing prisoners in systems of invisible walls—specific conventions created by hidden tekkies, sometimes long ago and never questioned since, by anybody.¹²

This is an insider’s rant—from Ted Nelson, the designer best known for coining the terms “hypertext” and “hypermedia” in 1963—but its concern with hidden, systemic, technocratic control is consistent with modern criticality as a whole. A Nelson acolyte puts a finer point on this critique by taking it down to a rudimentary design principle: “The file”—by which he means the convention of storing data in separate packages or, as Nelson put it, within a system of invisible walls—“is a set of philosophical ideas made into eternal flesh,” made into discourse or episteme, habitus or doxa.¹³

Given the rudimentary critical premise that such structures control our patterns of thought, experience, and desire and thus limit our sovereignty, the question is how to respond: attempt to tear down the system’s invisible walls or try to make them visible and plastic? Put differently, the question is really a philosophical one about the nature of freedom: is freedom itself social or individual, vertical or horizontal, ideal or material, free as in speech or free as in beer?¹⁴
The consequences of freedom are inevitably and necessarily material, of course, but freedom itself is a capacity to act not a thing to possess, and that capacity is always both a function of and definition of its limits. Fons Elders, the Dutch philosopher moderating the televised 1971 Foucault/Chomsky discussion, summed up this distinction neatly for our purposes: “I have the impression that for Mr. Chomsky rules and freedom are not opposed to each other, but more or less imply each other,” on the one hand, he said; but, on the other, “I get the impression that it is just the reverse for you, Mr. Foucault.” Indeed, Chomsky’s art lover might be said to be a lover of rules—not of rules per se but instead of getting the rules right—the rules of composition, say, or color, or harmony, on the one hand, and the rules of justice, freedom, and truth, on the other. Any specific instance of such rules—those of the Bauhaus, Constructivism, or De Stijl as artistic programs, for example, or of universal suffrage, healthcare, pension, and education as social programs—is by definition flawed, inadequate, overdetermined by its historical context, but it can still be a bearer of truth and speak meaningfully to our desire when, as Chomsky put it, “the structure of our mind and the structure of some aspect of [its] reality coincide sufficiently” and that coincidence takes on intelligible form. In Foucault’s analysis, by contrast, beauty exists only in the moment of exceeding those structures, the moment when the invisible walls are bypassed, the moment when the Bauhaus or universal suffrage are perceived as untruths, as forms of power/knowledge.

This debate about the role of openly articulated rules—that is, the role of institutions—for the realization of freedom has a long history, of course, but in the present context of rapidly expanding public disenfranchisement though cutbacks in social spending and the massive upwards redistribution of wealth, on the one hand, and the
stirrings of popular revolt against that redistribution, on the other, it is particularly relevant. It is sometimes cast as a battle between “verticals” and “horizontals,” as anthropologist and activist David Graeber put it recently. On the one hand, there are “the sort of people whose idea of political action is to march around with signs under the control of one or another top-down protest movement” and, on the other, there are those who refuse “to work with or through the government or other institutions which ultimately rely on the threat of force, and a dedication to horizontal democracy, to treating each other as we believe free men and women in a genuinely free society would treat each other.” A more liberal version has the horizontalist critique this way: “We need to starve the beast”—western democratic governments—“of our personal investment and energy.” Instead of democracy (“government for the horseback age”), we need “adhocracy,” an extra-institutional social process “as common as negotiating where to go for dinner or seat swaps on an airplane.” By definition, institutions, like any form of power, are backed by the threat of force. This is as true of the claim for cultural value of the Bauhaus as it is for the ethical claim made by universal suffrage, even if in both of these cases the level of force is relatively weak. Feeding such beasts by participating in their value systems is a form of complicity with that force. One critical response, thus, is simple withdrawal from any universalizing institutionality into localizing adhocratic sociality.

As insightful as they can be about the institutional operation of power, critics like Foucault and Bourdieu, Nelson and Graeber often gloss over two questions: first, the rudimentary ethical distinction between good power and bad, just power and unjust, public power and private, and, second, the qualitative distinction between discursive
power and market power or the cultivated political, social and cultural power of institutions, on the one hand, and the raw, asocial, extracultural, economic power of the invisible hand, on the other. This is not always the case, of course—think, for example, of Bourdieu’s call to “never forget that institutions of cultural freedom are social conquests, no less so than Social Security or the minimum wage,” or his simple but incisive characterization of neoliberalism as a “programme for destroying collective structures which may impede the pure market logic”—but it is the case often enough in their writing and is certainly so in the broad sweep of their influence. Because these writers and those that have followed them have focused so extensively on institutional critique, there has often been a passive, and sometimes active, critical sympathy for what Foucault late in his career called “the market’s role” as a “‘test’” that “pinpoint[s] the effects of excessive governmentality,” or more broadly, as a test that makes visible the effects of excessive institutionality.

The market does indeed do its critical work pinpointing and excising excesses and more in institutions of all sorts—familial, cultural, religious, governmental, and, with particular vengeance of late, educational: all that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, as the Communist Manifesto had it famously. We need only think of its consequences for the many examples of corrupt state socialism, or the overbearing authority of corrupt forms of political theology, or even its consequences for our modest cultural domain of art and its sometimes imperious sense of its own good taste, to acknowledge that capitalism has the power to liberate individuals from the tyranny of institutions. Neoliberals are right that the market serves as an effective check and balance
for institutions—that much is clear—but what serves to check and balance the excesses of the market?

Critical theory, like anything else, has a history and its tasks arise and fade from view in the march of time even if they inevitably live on as foundations or sites of repression for future projects. To illustrate this we need think only of Marx’s inaugural two-part claim that, first, “the criticism of religion has been essentially completed,” and, second, “the criticism of religion is the prerequisite [or foundation] of all criticism.” The discursive criticism of institutions developed by Foucault, Bourdieu, and others played a crucial role during the Cold War, just as the historical criticism of religion did in the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher and his followers in the wake of the French Revolution, but it too has been essentially completed. Of course, this does not mean in either instance that there is not more critique to be accomplished, more abuses of institutional authority to be uncovered, more discursive confabulations to be decoded, but instead only that the method or framework for criticizing institutions is firmly in place.

So too, just as Marx recognized the origin and engine of the criticism of religion in the triumph of the bourgeoisie, we must also see the foundation of our criticism of institutions arising from our period’s victorious consumer society. As one historian of that origin has put it, “everyone discovered that culture had been mass produced like Ford’s cars: the masses had a culture and culture had a mass. Culture was everywhere, no longer the property of the cultured or cultivated.” Everyone discovered that culture was a discourse, a habitus, a function of power, and each of us came to want his or her own piece of the cultural pie. We no longer had patience for dreaming of universal ideals, or
imagining and designing their implementation, and instead left that to the closed-door labors of technicians and the invisible hand of an increasingly unregulated economy.

The critical insight into institutions signaled by theoretical terms such as discourse and habitus inaugurated half a century ago in the midst of the Cold War was unquestionably liberating, and in many ways, just as the ongoing exercise of this critical project, like the ongoing critique of religion inaugurated two centuries ago in the wake of the French Revolution, will certainly continue to be. It is a project, however, that has been essentially completed, as Marx put it, and one that cannot be fully extricated from the very powerful, very effective critique of institutions given to us by neoliberalism.\(^{23}\)

As one critical observer has put it, critical theory’s emphasis on the critique of institutions rather than on seeing them as agents of freedom (as, for example, was the case with the old figure of the citizen) has inadvertently “delivered strong systems and weak subjects” and, as a result, has unintentionally “recapitulated the model of strong markets advanced by the culture wars.”\(^{24}\) Put differently, it leaves the domain of freedom largely in the dusty cloister of the archive. Our question, thus, must become one about looking at institutions anew—not to roll back the critique that has been essentially completed but instead to move beyond it to the critical tasks of our own day.

One option that is available to us is to reappraise institutions in the manner of Chomsky’s art lover. Can archives, systems, and rules be beautiful? Is it possible “to perceive how great” our institutions once were “within the limitations of their time, groping toward concepts and ideas and insights that they themselves could not be clearly aware of?” Can dry compartmentalism be reclaimed as a design project for living, vivid human freedom? What about the force backing such institutions—the rule of law, say, or
even the rule of taste? Such an enterprise was once central to modern art, as much as it was to its critical appreciation. By and large that project has been absent from our cherished institution for decades now but, like anything else, we do not work in a vacuum and there are glimmers of its rebirth all around us—in various artistic enterprises, political organizing efforts, and in many battles being waged on the technological front (the software-based delegated voting system Liquid Feedback developed and advocated for by the Pirate Party and illustrated in Figure 3 is a case in point).

Such a concern with the promise of institutions has been put in negative ethical terms by Slavoj Žižek: “Do we have the right to remain at a distance from state power,” he writes, “when state power is itself disintegrating, turning into an obscene exercise of violence so as to mask its own impotence?”25 There is no question that our half-century of institutional critique has been on target: institutions are invariably abusive; they represent congealed power that cannot but be taken advantage of by the innate human tendency toward prejudice and corruption. There is also no question that institutional critique has been effective, largely by cultural means, turning us all into Foucauldeans and defining the authority of our institution in self-reflexive, self-contradictory anti-institutional terms just as the institutional authority of the state has come to define itself evermore through a form of anti-governmentality.

The time is ripe to resuscitate and rethink the historical promise of institutional power as an agent of enlightenment. When power is registered vertically through hierarchical structures and rules backed by force in institutions such as governments, museums, or universities it will inevitably be abused, for sure, but it is also relatively available to be held accountable to the public interest. When it resides in the horizontal domain of the
economy, or technology, or our postmodern notions of disaggregated culture and micropolitics, it remains largely invisible and below the horizon of political challenges. The tender spot that marks the institutional desire of our social id cannot subsist as mere potential or in the cloistered immediacy of dinner negotiations or seat swaps on planes. As we “jump scales,” so David Harvey has put it, “the whole nature of the commons problem and the prospects of finding a solution change dramatically.” Indeed, he complains, a “fetishism of organizational preference (pure horizontality, for example) all too often stands in the way of exploring appropriate and effective solutions.”

Institutionality is first and foremost a question of scale. As its scale approaches sovereignty—i.e. sufficiently large to defend itself from threats and exploit the energies of its constituents—it nears the capacity for ugliness and barbarism; as its scale approaches universality—large enough to be representative and accountable to all—it nears the capacity for beauty and enlightenment. No institution is perfect, of course, but insofar as it reaches beyond the simple horizontality of the commodity form that originally gave rise to it and toward the vertical ideal of enlightenment universality, it nourishes the great democratic promise of enfranchisement. This has been the standard that has driven modern art from the beginning, through its many isms, and up into contemporary art. That not all artists and critics working with institutional form fully appreciate its history and drive is understandable—like any other ideal it is conflicted and routinely compromised—but that impurity makes it no less the motor of freedom.

“If men wish to be free,” Hannah Arendt insisted, “it is precisely sovereignty they must renounce.” If we wish to be free then there is nothing better we can do than insist upon systems, rules, enclosures, and institutions that redirect the unbridled sovereignty of
politicians, bankers, and ourselves. Freedom from domination—particularly, at this moment in much of the world, freedom from the ruthless domination of the market—depends on such institutionality. Early twentieth-century artistic programs like the Bauhaus and social programs like universal suffrage were, for sure, limited institutions thick with the exercise of power/knowledge, but from the vantage of a Chomskyean art lover looking back on them now they are nothing short of beautiful. Love of this sort is just the most conventional form of art appreciation—it is the love of objects that take on the shimmering penumbra of aesthetic value as they deteriorate into ruins. For some of us latterday verticals, that makes their beauty all the more soul-stirring, all the more an experience of newly enflamed desire arising from the unrealized yearnings of the past.

2 “[W]e have in the density of discursive practices, systems that establish statements as events (with their own conditions and domain of appearance) and things (with their own possibility and field of use). They are all these systems of statements (whether events or things) that I propose to call *archive.*” (Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language* (New York: Vintage, 1982), p. 128). For one comprehensive historical investigation into these limits see Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (New York: Verso, 1993).

3 Allan Sekula, “Between the Net and the Deep Blue Sea (Rethinking the Traffic in Photographs),” *October* 102 (Fall 2002), p. 24.


5 Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, p. 133.


11 T. J. Clark, _Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism_ (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 7. He goes on to describe the terror as so: “the true terror of this new order has to do with its being ruled—and obscurely felt to be ruled—by sheer concatenation of profit and loss, bids and bargains: that is, by a system without any focusing purpose to it, or any compelling image or ritualization of that purpose” (p. 8).


14 See Richard Stallman’s distinction between libre and gratis, e.g.: “‘free software’ is a matter of liberty, not price. To understand the concept, you should think of ‘free’ as in ‘free speech,’ not as in ‘free beer’.” [https://www.gnu.org/philosophy/free-sw.html](https://www.gnu.org/philosophy/free-sw.html)


18 Peter Fein, “Democracy is Obsolete,” *Techpresident* (June 12, 2012),

19 Pierre Bourdieu, Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, p. 198;


23 As argued, for example, in Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2006).


26 David Harvey, Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution (London: Verso, 2012), p. 68.