R.H. Quaytman. Installation of *Chapter 10* series of paintings in *From One O to the Other*, March 20–April 20, 2008.
Institutional Responsibility: The Short Life of Orchard

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“Institutional Critique,” as we know it, is obsolete. Institutions are composed of individuals—each of whom performs tens if not hundreds of actions daily to sustain the operation of their enterprise. This welter of interpersonal actions—or associations—is stabilized, as Bruno Latour has argued in Reassembling the Social, by objects (or constellations of objects) that sustain an institution’s mission.¹ The material contours of a “museum,” for example, typically encompass galleries, administrative offices, a theater, a store, a restaurant, and spaces behind the scenes for conservation and installation. The challenges of institutional critique have traditionally targeted such assemblages of objects while minimizing or overlooking altogether their human dimension. Anyone who has worked in a museum—as I have—knows that programs and policies do not unfold automatically from an architectural envelope. Serious disagreements and debates occur among colleagues as a project moves upstream through the institutional flowchart from inspiration to public program. Why is it that most “institutional critique” has remained satisfied with the easy target of bricks and mortar, while setting aside the more volatile flesh, bones, and brains that are just as much a part of an organization’s equipment?

Orchard did not take the easy way out. Most of its members are associated with “institutional critique,” but in founding their own organization—a gallery to be run cooperatively for three years—they posed a fundamental question: what does it mean to criticize an institution of which you are a member? In actuality, this is the most ordinary of activities. Who would assume that receiving a paycheck from a particular enterprise would automatically seal one’s complicity with the totality of its values and procedures? If this were so, then the elite academic setting of much current progressive art history would have to be carefully examined (which is undoubtedly a good idea). I am implicated myself because whatever I say for or against a particular institution must inevitably lead back to, or be placed beside my own association with a university, Yale, that has thousands of worldly associations whose character may powerfully undermine—or equally assertively enhance—the legitimacy of my claims. And I’m not alone on such unstable ground. One of the most
interesting dimensions of Orchard was the more-or-less direct exposure of the working procedures of the collective in its final products. In other words, what Orchard was explicitly “made of” was the texture of debate and disagreement among its members that led to particular projects that cumulatively, over the three years of its activities, constituted an “institutional identity.” That members of the Orchard collective had lively disagreements with one another might be insider knowledge but is nevertheless widely known. I have no interest in imagining how opposing camps lined up, and I don’t intend to take sides, but I am profoundly interested in how Orchard made visible the very aspect of institutions that is usually buried under the heavy didacticism of conventional “institutional critique.” For what Orchard grew from was a living and open-ended form of institutional responsibility—the responsibility to interpret the goals and exigencies of one’s own institution (or institutions) that change or develop over time and that consequently resist precise specification as an object of critique. Orchard’s project is consistent with a range of recent activities among artists that aim to delineate, as a kind of aesthetic object, ephemeral occasions of debate and disagreement—precisely the texture of associations that underlies any institution. Examples include the unitednationsplaza project initiated by Anton Vidokle; the monologues of Orchard member Andrea Fraser; and works by Tino Sehgal such as his exhibition, This Situation, at Marian Goodman Gallery in 2007–2008 in which a troupe of dancer-conversationalists trained by the artist undertook an endless live debate in the gallery prompted by their recitation of texts on the subject of spectacle and artistic labor. The conversation was perpetually interrupted by the arrival of new visitors who were greeted in unison by the performers, before discussion was jumpstarted again through the prompt of another quotation.

Orchard implicitly exhibited its responsibility to itself as a public space and as an institution, but many of its presentations, by members and “outsiders” alike (such as Zoe Leonard and Ken Jacobs, to name only two), explicitly thematized a related kind of obligation—the responsibility of art for its impact on cities and towns. The question of whether art should, or even can, be held responsible for its ex post facto consequences is of great interest to me. The question implies an anticipatory consideration on the part of the artwork for the effects of its future economic, philosophical, and spatial circulation. One could say that in order to take seriously this responsibility, the nature of aesthetics must shift toward an ethics of emplacement, whereby the artwork’s “meaning” derives from its movements in time and space—or, in Latour’s terms, the associations it establishes—rather than its “content” per se. Artists involved with such questions of emplacement and reenactment,
ranging from Karin Schneider to Sharon Hayes, formed an important dimension of Orchard’s program. But I’m getting ahead of myself, because what must be acknowledged before pursuing this issue further are the massive—some might say catastrophic—effects of art on the cities and towns where it is widely produced and/or exhibited. That art gentrifies is now a commonplace, but the truism is worth lingering over. Think of the enormous wealth that has colonized the Hamptons; the commercial maelstrom of Soho; and the myriad high-end residential towers rising in Chelsea with names like “Modern” or otherwise marketed through association with art. Remember the formerly bohemian outposts of Taos, Santa Fe, or Provincetown that have become major tourist destinations studded with galleries no bona fide art world denizen would condescend to enter. In such places the value of “art” has been so thoroughly dissolved into the value of real estate and class distinction that to extract cleanly an object of aesthetics and philosophy would be an exercise in myopia so stunning that it verges on irresponsibility. Orchard refused this myopia. Its members were well aware that over the three years of the project the Lower East Side was changing dramatically around them. At the end of Orchard’s run many more galleries inhabited the neighborhood, not to mention new boutiques and (largely modest) apartment towers that hadn’t been there three years before. Was Orchard an engine of development—or at least a gear in that engine? Undoubtedly. To what extent can the organization be held responsible for creating these conditions? That is the question—though it’s probably too soon to answer.

In this regard, I find particularly significant Orchard’s ostensibly mundane or practical decision to limit the duration of its enterprise to three years. On many grounds, Orchard was a great success and probably could have developed a sustainable business plan and continued indefinitely. This is what success is supposed to mean in the late capitalist/neoliberal art world: grow or die. Just consider the ponderous museums that have sprung up all over the world during the art booms stretching from the 1980s to the present. The bloated Broad collection at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the New York Museum of Modern Art’s vertiginous sky atrium (which seems to cry out for suicide attempts) are just two American examples of a spatial rhetoric that has become excruciatingly inflated. Blue-chip galleries, too—like little commercial Guggenheims—want only to replicate: Gagosian and Guggenheim share a business model of infinite global expansion. The not-so-subtle message is: scale is what matters in art (as in real estate), and art must increase in volume and financial value to survive. This is interesting from the point of view of cultural diagnostics but not always interesting in the cavernous
galleries themselves. Recall that though Warhol presided over the second half of the twentieth century through rampant overproduction, Duchamp’s message was always premised on a strict control of production and a fascination with anticipating the work’s circulation. By limiting its project to three years, Orchard established a beachhead within the dizzying expansion of the art/real estate matrix. This temporal limit afforded the space (as opposed to the real estate) for a small community of artists, critics, and patrons to pursue an idea. The contraction of Orchard’s life in external terms allowed for the intramural expansion of its program. Instead of saying, “A gallery that lasted for only three years—how pathetic!” we can marvel, “An exhibition that kept going for three years—how amazing!” One of the accomplishments of this extended reflection was to chronicle through a wide range of programs the interface between art and a single neighborhood—the Lower East Side.

Choosing to limit Orchard’s lifespan was a smart move, but the real test comes in evaluating how well the resulting opportunity was exploited, and this begs a difficult, though fundamental, question: what relationship holds between “art” and the “social”? I believe Orchard’s ambition was to conduct a sustained meditation on the emplacement and responsibility of art within particular communities. Several sorts of formal solution were proposed over the course of the gallery’s life, but here I have space to discuss only one of them. 5

Art history and criticism of the past few decades have predominantly theorized the relationship between “art” and “society” as mimetic. This mimesis has at least three moods, each of which appears deceptively distinct from the others. They include (1) the positively reflective, or avant-garde model of mimesis in which social forces are said to cause, or more mildly, to account for (either directly or indirectly) the work’s revolutionary qualities; (2) the negatively reflective model of mimesis, otherwise known as “subversion,” in which a curt and startling act of appropriation (i.e., reflection with minimal mediation) or other forms of mimicry are granted the power to “reveal” the social; and (3) thematically reflective mimesis in which “social content” is imported directly into the work of art. (The first two forms of mimeticism are more stealthy because they may be highly abstract or even completely nonobjective, as in Picasso’s cubism, where semiotic aporias correspond to a crisis in social signification in the years leading to World War I.) The art that most interests me attempts to disable the critical habit of mimesis in favor of what might be called a productive aesthetics of open platforms. Examples famously include


works by Rirkrit Tiravanija and Liam Gillick in which visitors may enter a space of potential action. This is the context, I think, in which to evaluate Orchard’s project. But the question remains, what happens in or on these platforms?

In Reassembling the Social, Bruno Latour seeks to bring sociology (and the social) back to its roots in association. Latour is piquantly critical of sociologists who assume a generalized motivating force of the “social” as a kind of deus ex machina pressed into service to explain human activity. Indeed, a reliance on vague and undifferentiated “social forces” underlies the mimetic accounts of art’s role vis-à-vis the social. As Latour himself admits, it is hard to live without such an amenable crutch, but his recommendation to sociologists is to follow chains of association closely, remaining sensitive to how various human and objective actors mediate a situation as opposed to merely reflecting some fabricated “social reality” beyond or beneath. Because mediation is rooted in action and transformation, it is closely tied to the issue of responsibility I have been developing here, but the question remains: how is such responsibility elaborated on the level of form, in the individual work of art?

From One O to the Other was the penultimate exhibition at Orchard; it took place in March and April of 2008, and can be understood as a multidimensional exploration of what counts for an archive. Contributors included Rhea Anastas, R.H. Quaytman, and Amy Sillman, each of whom addressed archives in a particular way. Anastas presented a selection of press coverage on Orchard in vitrines, and Sillman made slyly sophisticated gouache and ink portraits (face only) on paper of Orchard participants and friends. Rather than hanging on the wall, Sillman’s drawings were available for anyone to page through and rearrange on a long table that doubled as a desk occupying the center of the narrow front section of the gallery. Quaytman’s contribution came in three parts. The most prominent was a series of paintings on wood collectively titled Chapter 10: Ark and made during the years the artist served as director of Orchard. Some panels from the series were hung on the walls in the usual manner, while others were held in potential—stored in a handsome shelving unit closely resembling those that furnish museums’ or galleries’ storage rooms. Visitors were invited by gallery attendants to explore this open storage by propping paintings on top of the shelf for a quick look, or hanging them up in a few spots on the adjacent wall reserved for this purpose. Quaytman also made a new version of Orchard Spreadsheet that outlines in financial terms the life of the organization, and a beautiful catalogue, Allegorical Decoys, designed by Geoff Kaplan to function inside out: the dust cover expands into a large poster including an archive of the book’s illustrations, while the pages themselves carry only text.
Much can be said regarding this exhibition’s approach to the ethical problem of how and for whom archives are constructed and how such archives serve as platforms for the sort of associations Latour speaks of. That both Sillman and Quaytman solicit handling seems significant: visitors were called upon to think simultaneously with the eye and the hand. And in both artists’ work the “matter” of the institution was to be handled—in Sillman’s drawings, the faces of those who made and consumed Orchard’s programs; in Quaytman’s silkscreen paintings, the Orchard space itself, as represented in motifs derived from Polaroid photographs of the gallery’s architecture, either empty (typically photographed from skewed perspectives) or inhabited by visitors who might be members of the collective or their friends. Onto such photographically derived source material, Quaytman often silk-screened a tight raster of horizontal lines inducing an optical burn that bordered on pain. The join established between seeing and handling, as well as the fusion of disorienting optical sensation and a strong consciousness of literal displacement in a particular place in a particular city, caused the viewer simultaneously to position herself in optical experience and in a network of institutional association. Quaytman’s paintings (as well as Sillman’s drawings) trigger an action of real association on the part of the viewer who must move from supposedly self-possessed vision to the dispossession of a neighborhood undergoing gentrification. Painting functions as a reservoir of actual lines of association between the eye (the person) and the world. Consequently, the artwork behaves as a mediator not a mimetic reflection. Latour has a marvelous quasi-museological term to describe what, in his view, sociologists should do: collecting the social, or, better, in the very title of his book, “reassembling the social.” By such strategies of collecting Latour does not mean (and nor do I) to suggest a passive registration of evidence of social events but rather to propose something more fundamental, something Jacques Derrida also recognized, about the archive’s power to open onto a future to come. The responsibility of those whose medium is archives (including artists, critics, and art historians) is to construct them with care. Here are four qualities that strike me in Quaytman’s painterly archive: (1) vision causes pain (optical burning); (2) paintings are accumulated (as wealth, in storage shelves); (3) viewers look because they wish to place themselves meaningfully in architectural and urban space; and (4) no arrangement of pictures is final. These archival conditions offer a tool kit—one of many Orchard provided over its lifetime—for rethinking the forms and responsibilities of association, for reassembling the social.
Notes
1. In Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), Bruno Latour proposes to “redefine[s] sociology not as the ‘science of the social,’ but as the *tracing of associations*” (5). He also insists that the face-to-face contact that is sometimes taken as the heart of social life is sustained over time through “objects”—in other words, the material substrate that stabilizes the ephemeral contacts between people. For instance, he declares, “It is always things—and now I mean this last word literally—which, in practice, lend their ‘steely’ quality to the hapless ‘society’” (68).

2. I am indebted in this observation to discussions with Orchard member Nic Guagnini.


4. This schematic list does not even begin to acknowledge the worldwide effects of “starchitect” museums and biennales in enhancing development and tourism in cities ranging from Bilbao to Johannesburg.

5. To summarize Orchard’s complex activities in a text of this length is impossible. One of the fascinating qualities of the gallery’s program was its parallel support of documentary-oriented projects that addressed histories of the Lower East Side and its serious engagement with legacies of post-minimalism—particularly pivoting on the interpenetration of phenomenological positioning of individual viewers and an outward-directed site-specificity. I choose to discuss painting because it has, until recently, seemed to me the medium most resistant to these issues.

6. “There is no society, no social realm, and no social ties, but there exist translations between mediators that may generate traceable associations.” Latour, 108; emphasis in original.

7. One element of this exhibition was to invite guests to gallery sit on selected Sundays. I was one of those guests on Sunday, 6 April 2008.

8. “A good account will perform the social in the precise sense that some of the participants in the action—through the controversial agency of the author—will be assembled in such a way that they can be collected together.” Latour, 138. And, “to study is always to do politics in the sense that it collects or composes what the common world is made of” (256).

9. Latour is critical of deconstruction, but Derrida’s assertion in Archive Fever that the archive must open onto the future as it assembles the past seems consistent with Latour’s belief in a politics based on “reassembling the social.” Derrida declares, “The archivist produces more archive, and that is why the archive is never closed. It opens out of the future.” And “How can we think about this fatal repetition, about repetition in general in its relationship to memory and the archive? It is easy to perceive, if not to interpret, the necessity of such a relationship, at least if one associates the archive, as naturally one is always tempted to do, with repetition, and repetition with the past. But it is the future that is at issue here, and the archive as an irreducible experience of the future.” Jacques Derrida, Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 68.