

CFAR's *Papers on Power* is a series of commissioned essays for which artists, writers, activists, and cultural producers have been asked to respond to the question “What is power?” in whatever form best relates to their work and thinking.

BITING THE HAND THAT FEEDS YOU

BREAKING THE CYCLE OF INSTITUTIONAL DEPENDENCY

LIBBY WERBEL

I identify as an artist who works non-traditionally and with criticality. Sometimes I even get paid to explore this criticism as part of my work inside cultural institutions. This results in me often challenging the very notion or purpose of the modern-day museum. But I often wonder why I continue to be invited in to air the dirty laundry of institutionality. Is there some deep desire to be exposed for perpetuating cycles of oppression? Some punishment kink in all of this? Or, perhaps, by allowing themselves (i.e. an institution or canon) to be investigated under the lens of institutional critique, they believe themselves to be signaling their alignment with the critic and therefore not a part of the problem. Or (and this is what I often fear) is it the inclusion of the criticism that defangs it? After all, if the critics are part of the institution, they can't recuse themselves from it.

This request to reflect on power has found me in an early stage of research, steeping in some small beginnings. Below is a loose list of “seeds” that I am planting, in hopes they might flourish into something broader. Some items on the list require attention that goes past my capacity; some may read as existential pontifications (and that's fair). Some are examples of subversive acts that I need to sit with for a while. There is a certain level of repetition, as I figure out how to ask the question the right way. This form of sharing is meant to expose the vulnerability of a process, and acknowledge that I most often exist mid-learning. This list appears in no particular order; it's meant to be read on shuffle:

1. The Art World Is Filled with Tops

When looking at institutional critique through the lens of its actual accomplishments within the art canon, I often wonder, “Who is on top?” When speaking about the arts, realistically, once you reach the institutional level, there are rarely tops or bottoms negotiating this dilemma. Only top on top of top on top of top, in perpetuity.

2. Andrea Fraser, *Untitled*, 2003

How can I thank Andrea Fraser enough? She made the most ultimate sacrifice by letting the money of it enter her, and still no one listened. She's made countless pieces about the cost of it all, about the challenge of working within the institutions that wanted to pimp her. Her practice is filled with so many of these gestures, of self-immolation and protest. Works that communicate urgency and desperation for systemic change. She is constantly questioning the museum's authenticity and care, and when she debuted her infamous piece *Untitled*, 2003, the institutions who showed it might have applauded its pointedness or gasped at its crudeness, but never changed how they talk about (or increased how often they show) a woman's work.

3. Museums as Monuments

How is a collective mythology preserved? Whose narratives are perpetuated under the name of the arts? It's a minefield to step into right now. Historical, art, and scientific museums, operating as keepers of our culture, have been exposed to be foundationally harmful. They are riddled with white supremacy and misguided attempts at cultural preservation or advancement in the name of that supremacy. But also, who am I to insert more questions into this massive problem? Or answers? When asked, I often just say, “Begin again.” But that is easy to say when I am tied to neither an institution nor a practice that depends on one. Museums, much like monuments, were erected by a ruling class and therefore will never be neutral. Once we can collectively accept their limitations, we can start to imagine what comes next. What comes after the museum?

4. Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum*, 1992

This exhibition opened exactly one week before the L.A. uprising that took place in response to the acquittal of Rodney King's police abusers. Wilson's exhibit showed work from the permanent collection of the Maryland Historical Society, including nineteenth-century armchairs carved by slaves, silver repoussé vessels displayed next to iron shackles, a whipping post, a Ku Klux Klan robe in a baby carriage, and an eighteenth-century portrait of a wealthy white child standing beside a young black man with a metal collar around his neck. This exhibition was so successful in addressing blatant inequities in the historical telling of our nation that the Maryland Historical Society was forced to fire its director as it reckoned with its own role in all of it. Wilson is often asked about his wildly applauded project that took place almost 30 years ago and regularly responds that within the institutional landscape not much has changed since then. Where is the learning?

5. Dismantling white supremacy would ultimately mean dismantling much of the social and political institutions of the modern world, including the museum.

How are we eventually going to find a new form of exhibition, a new home for art? We need a new platform for learning that is outside of these houses that currently corrupt us. These houses of rigmarole. Short sightedness. Houses of capital. Built in the likeness of white supremacy, these houses of perpetual harm. Art is essential and probably one of the most important tools for cultural advancement, yet it is still stuck within a cycle of dependency of the burning house it needs to escape: the museum. How can artists escape the museum? How can the public interest escape the museum? Where will we go?

6. Cameron Rowland, *Encumbrance*, 2020

Just all of it.

7. Is it possible to exist in both an embrace of, and a resistance to, something like a museum?

I believe in scholarship, knowledge, and record keeping. I believe in storytelling and story creating. I appreciate the world-building that happens in a museum, and how an artist and their idea can teach us new ways to see and think. But I am ultimately at a loss as to how we can right the wrongs of years upon years of erasure, oppression, and denial of so many other avenues of cultural artistry, so many perspectives not shown or shared through the museum's telling of the world. We did not value other people's stories enough to preserve them properly. They've been sifted through the sieve of historical patterns of taking and taking and taking.

8. Lauren Halsey and the Summaeverything Center

Inspired by the Black Panther Party's Free Breakfast for School Children Program and other models of self-sufficiency, Halsey founded this community center in 2020 and funded it entirely through her art sales and donations. This effort supports and feeds the South Central L.A. neighborhood she is from and makes art about. How can we expand on these ideas of circular economies within the arts? What does mutual aid look like when adapted and applied to institutional design? Let's name our leaders when we see them.

9. Museums Are Made up of Fragile Shit

I don't want your museums. I don't want the collections or the liabilities. I don't want the administrators or the docents. But I do want the buildings. I want those galleries. God, I want those walls. I want those offices. I want that infrastructure. I want the platform. But don't get it twisted, I don't want your museums any longer. Let's go inside those buildings and let's start fresh. Let's pay the mortgage with punk shows and symposiums. Let's get insurance by lying. Let's reappropriate every artifact and show 3D-printed reproductions (all over the world) of the originals with text written by and for the people they belong to (or their descendants). So we can really learn. Let's have those folks also determine what to share from their ancestors and what to keep secret. Let's remind ourselves that not everything is for us. Let's charge people entry by their income, and believe what they tell us. It's also fine if they lie. Let's just trust people as a general rule. It will not be our job to police them or correct their etiquette within these walls. This will be a new way to look at it all. If they want to touch it, or lick it, or even break it, they get to be a part of the great continuum of production and consumption. Those are the consequences of making and exhibiting fragile shit.

10. Black Mask Collective, 1966

Black Mask Collective effectively closed down MoMA in 1966 just by stating in their self-published magazine that they would. This radical anarchist artist coalition, helmed by artists Ben Morea and Ron Hahne, proclaimed they were going to shut it down on October 10th at 12 p.m., much to the fear and anxiety of the museum, which decided to preemptively close that day under threat of the unknown. When the time came, five members of BMC walked up and put a printed paper sign on MoMA's doors. It just said “MUSEUM CLOSED.” They had succeeded.

The fear of the revolution can sometimes be just as useful a tool as the revolutionary act itself. If rebellion is the immediate threat, the requested change might be granted out of fear of losing power. This point of tension is also a driving force of progress.

11. It is a tragedy that art and the ideas of an artist should be bound to monies or a monied world whatsoever.

Why are we stuck in a system of valuation that is both abysmal and damaging to artists, arts workers, and society at large? All this buying and selling of work that eventually piles up in the care of an aging institution, which is then tasked/burdened with the responsibility of it all. Where else does it go once it is made? Once it is purchased? Where do artists imagine their art goes? Why is it okay that an artist makes half of a sale from a gallery's listing price, then watches their work sell at auction for an exponentially inflated amount? Can an artist begin to trade their work for something that also accumulates value? What would that be? Land? Cryptocurrency? Stocks?

12. Latoya Ruby Frazier, *Flint Is Family*, 2016

Latoya Ruby Frazier used the proceeds of her art sales from her 2016 exhibition *Flint Is Family* to purchase a giant atmospheric water generator and installed it in an underserved industrial neighborhood in Flint, Michigan. Today it is still a functioning, free, accessible site for clean water. When left with no alternatives, how else can we use art to transform our neighborhoods? How can we use it to transform governing bodies? How can we turn museums into atmospheric water generators? Or as a parallel of the need depending on the place?

13. The Plight of Institutional Critique

To be entrenched in discussion of how museums or certain cultural institutions have not served us/have never served us/are not for us might not be that effective if you are having this discussion inside the museum. Why are we making art about our criticism, but still depending on those same systems to share it? The eventual co-opting of institutional critique is fraught within the cycle of production/consumption; the arts eventually monetize subversive ideas and make them into capital. Who in the end becomes the holder (or owner) of these ideas then? The funders? The institution? The curators? The writers? And how are they any different than me, the critical? Most of us engaging in this level of critique are spinning on the fingertip of privilege, just to have the opportunity to disavow, reject, or question the institutions which we are engaging with (or dependent on). It seems laughable at this point to identify myself as outside of something by proclaiming I am not happy with it. But who among us are outside of it, of those aiming to orchestrate a take down?

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Biography:

Libby Werbel is an artist, curator, and social organizer living and working in Portland, Oregon. She has worked in the arts for over fifteen years. In 2012, she founded the Portland Museum of Modern Art (PMOMA) project, researching and exercising theories around institutional critique. This exhibition space/ community-built museum was created to draw attention to Portland's lack of modern and contemporary institutions for visual art, incite inspiration around collective organizing, and examine the assumptions around the role of a museum. Most recently Werbel fulfilled a two-year position as Visiting Artistic Director at Portland Art Museum where she created five unique exhibitions encouraging audiences to think critically about how museums have traditionally granted access to art and knowledge, and what the future of the Institution could look like, titled *WeConstruct.Marvels.Between.Monuments*. and has published a book under the same title. She currently works as the Director of Public Programming and Engagement at the lumber room.