



The Book as Agora

How should art institutions respond to the current political climate? Michal B. Ron reviews Paper Monument's recent book, in which various art professionals offer their propositions to six perceptive questions.

Critique / Michal B. Ron October 8, 2019

As radical, as mother, as salad, as shelter: What should art institutions do now? Edited by Paper Monument, New York, 2018.

"In light of recent political shifts across the globe," demands the first of six questions in a questionnaire, "have you sensed a change in the position of the art institution vis-à-vis political activism?" Reading the question, I wondered what kind of activism had fallen into my hands this time—in the form of a book with a brown cover, its puzzling, appealing, captivating title printed in white: *As radical, as mother, as salad, as shelter: What should art institutions do now?*

Paper Monument book cover from web.jpg



As radical, as mother, as salad, as shelter: What should art institutions do now?

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cover of *As radical, as mother, as salad, as shelter: What should art institutions do now?* Edited by Paper Monument, New York, 2018.

At first this seemed to me an insular American discussion. The participants: art professionals, curators, and educators, from large collecting art institutions, as well as small independent grassroots initiatives, from all over the US. The editors: the enigmatically named “Paper Monument”—a Brooklyn-based non-profit art press, which the colophon reveals to be Dushko Petrovich and Roger White, with Prem Krishnamurthy as associate editor. The text: a questionnaire concerning art institutions’ activist and political positions, and the reflective responses of the above individuals – mission-driven cultural agents who feel committed to proposing an alternative to chauvinist, misogynic, racist, socially and environmentally irresponsible, potentially violent populism, to which the inauguration of President Donald Trump gave rise.

What is this? I asked myself: A selfies book, i.e., a stage to perform critical sensitivities? A Wailing Wall for expressing frustration, or a tour-de-force of demonstrative, careful, well-articulated analysis of crisis? (May I introduce a new term, crisisial times—both our crisis-ridden era, and our crisis of critique.) Is this not how the left— which cultural workers identify themselves with—got here in the first place? And by here I mean a position of frustration, crisis, and futility. By being over-self-reflective, but under-active-ahead (Go ahead! Think ahead! Act forward not backward! I am thinking here of Walter Benjamin’s Angel of History, “his face is turned toward the past”, while a storm “propels him into the future to which his back is turned.” Is this a leftie Angel or are all lefties angels?). A left that prefers an activism-in-general? How should we read this document of insular American problems in Europe or in other contexts, places with different concerns?

American institutions are characterized by the under-representation of people of color, and their neglect as an audience. Are our worries different? In Germany, the term “migration background” stands for society’s Others. It hides within it the justification for discrimination against populations: the Others are first, second, or third-generation immigrants, who therefore, allegedly, don’t truly belong to the nation. In Israel, the discourse of discrimination refers to the institutional domination of an Ashkenazi elite over oppressed social groups, be they immigrants with non-European cultural roots, or worse, the indigenous Palestinian population. The right-wing political regime dangerously instrumentalizes this discourse in persecuting cultural institutions. A nationalistic propaganda had been set to crush any politically critical production whatsoever, using delegitimization and the withdrawal of funding as its most powerful and effective threats.

Why a book? I wonder. Is it for the monumentalization of a left that has once been for a future to come? The name of the editing agency Paper Monument certainly seems to hint at this. If their inquiry targets the present, wouldn’t a magazine reach a larger readership with its circulation? Wouldn’t an online platform be still more accessible than a printed publication?

Then, one of the responses draws me in, invites me as an outside reader into the conversation. No wonder it was a poet who got my attention in this way: “Even a living room can be a public space,” writes Ken Chen, executive director of the Asian American Writers’ Workshop, who since the book appeared had left the institution, after eleven years (20).¹ In his free-flying text, which leaves behind the Q&A format of the questionnaire, he proposes that “creativity is social” – an emancipatory insight that retrieves cultural making from institutional power structures back into people’s hands, ears, minds, and proportions (24). “Life happens when you are not making declarations. Life happens when you are with other people. So do new openings for your aesthetics and your politics,” Chen concludes (31). Indeed, the strength of this publication, as a “paper monument”, is in the chance it grants for meeting people between its pages, its bricks, walls; for finding comrades and friends in spirit within its published words.



[AAWWTV: Unreal News with Jennifer Hayashida, John Yau, & Ken Chen](#) [2]

Video of AAWWTV: Unreal News with Jennifer Hayashida, John Yau, & Ken Chen

تشن وكن ياو جون ، هياشيدا جنيفر مع "عند مش" أخبار

"How can art institutions be better?" asks the closing question. "Drop the race for biggest buildings, biggest collection, biggest opening, biggest spectacle, biggest ad, biggest font size ... all the symptoms of ego-driven patriarchal system that have a chokehold on us," demands Regine Basha, independent curator and residency director of Pioneer Works. "Race instead toward being the most generous to artists and to the causes that affect an open society. [...]" (6). "Can an art institution go from being an object of critique to a site for organizing? How?" Executive director of The Lab in San Francisco Dena Beard, sharply replies: "[...] while I am listening, I can also throw wrenches in the machine of capitalism. Not 'critique,' which boils down to using language to defend our nebulous claim on a pseudo-democracy, but rather, *I can actively create problems for the state* [her emphasis]" (10).

And there are more intriguing ideas, which I wish to spread wider by repeating. "Institutions should offer their given infrastructures for preservation of the vulnerable," writes Anthony Elms, chief curator of ICA Philadelphia (38), and several speakers repeat this sensitive expectation. They also acknowledge that offering clean toilets free of charge is an important public service for institutions, an anecdotal fact that nonetheless reappears in several reports in the book. The book's powerful title derives from the response of curator of Visual Art at the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art Kristan Kennedy to the question, "What other roles can or should [the art institution] play?" Kennedy writes in full Schwung:

Institution as radical, Institution as mother, Institution as salad, Institution as shelter, Institution as hospice, Institution as acknowledgment of stolen lands, Institution as public policy, Institution as day care, Institution as water fountain, Institution as nightlife, Institution as ally. Institution as pet. Institution as kitchen, Institution as co-conspirator, Institution as reparations, Institution as decolonizer. Institution as decanonizer. Institution as Un-stitution. (63)

Chris Reitz, gallery director and assistant professor of Critical and Curatorial Studies at the University of Louisville, reminds us what an exhibition is all about, in his response to the question, "Recent controversies over curatorial choices have foregrounded the different ways in which institutions envision their audience(s). In your experience, is this process changing? How should it proceed?" Reitz insists on the power and responsibility of expertise against populism and writes: "[...] Exhibitions should be difficult. They should require substantial research to produce and they should demand serious, sustained engagement from their viewers [...] thorough analysis and historical orientation are our primary responsibilities (and our most powerful tools.)" (88).

The Art Newspaper Podcasts - Should museums sell works of art? Plus, activism at the Whitney Biennial

To the question "What other institutions, curators, or publics do you look to in formulating your own institution's position?" Fundación 4-18 director and founder Nicolas Rodríguez Melo mentions the Baltimore Museum of Art, which "announced its new policy of selling works from canonical artists and old masters to build a fund so they can start purchasing emerging and local black American artists." (91) It is termed "diaccession." A simple principle that makes so much sense, reversing priorities. No longer safekeeping the old and acknowledged, forever holding their ground, but rather using masterpieces as assets that enable (ex)change, as face cards to play in a poker game of



culture. Followed ad absurdum, once the game was won, the old and acknowledged would lose value and no longer find buyers, perhaps only among the rich and uninformed (in developing countries?). Would this be the fulfillment of Marx's prophecy?

Until such a moment arrives, this inspiring little book offers a powerful collective manifesto. Now the reader can become a questioner, and expand the endeavor globally. How would your peers around the world reply?

- [1.](#) Editor's note: the responders' positions are current for the time of the book's publication.

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