

# GUEST WRITER

## Hot-wired Perceptions

by James Merrigan

*It's not a question of being against the institution:  
We are the institution.* (Andrea Fraser)<sup>1</sup>



Vera Klute, *Rear Window*, 2013 collage

Views

A greyscale collage of pencil, watercolour and photographic elements, Vera Klute's *Rear Window* is a portrait of a banjaxed inner city Dublin landscape that forensically documents the aftermath of a delinquent joyride from the vantage point of one of Fire Station's residential studios. Composed of episodic quadrants within the frame of two arched windows, the narrative roles out clockwise, equating the piths of delinquency of *A Clockwork Orange*. Starting with the top-left quadrant: black smoke bellows from a burnt-out car; next, two men with fire extinguishers perform the urgent task of putting out the fire that presumably approaches their place of business; then, teenagers, locals, passersby accumulate; and finally, a pair of binoculars gawk vulgarly from the bottom-left quadrant at a parked Garda squad car and ambulance. Just below this pictorial rebus a verbal one is presented as signage with the approximation of the word FIRE – 'F' being cropped just below the short horizontal cross. Read literally, without context, FIRE could purport to the present emergency. Or, by substituting an 'E' for the cropped 'F', the misreading could be construed as a 'fadaless' EIRE, signifying a State of Emergency.

As part of the twentieth year anniversary celebrations of Fire Station Artists' Studios (FSAS), Dublin, previous and current artist residents were asked by Clodagh Kenny (Director) and Liz Burns (Arts Programme Manager) to submit some form of visual response for the 4<sup>th</sup> issue of *News Views* that you hold in your hand. On first seeing Vera Klute's contribution I was smitten. For one thing it was an artwork anchor for the essay that you are about to read. Secondly, it was an honest, self-reflective response to the experience of living in FSAS. And thirdly, it was contextual, critical and relevant to question of the 'institution' that had been pitched to me by Liz and Clodagh as a suitable subject to discuss with regard to FSAS being, above all else, an institution. However, rather than take the theory of the institution for another joyride, I would rather discuss the 'perception' of the institution – via Vera Klute's visual response – as an all pervasive entity and homogenising agent, inhabiting and influencing the lives and walls of the artist, their art, the artworld and its discourse.

Since the 1960s, when art exited the hall of transcendental individualism (American Abstract Expressionism) and entered the administrative aesthetic of Conceptualism and Minimalism, the contextual frame of art lost a few teeth – inside became outside and vice versa. Then, 'institutional' became synonymous with 'critique'. Theoretically speaking, Institutional Critique – the systematic inquiry into the workings of art institutions *eg* galleries, museums etcetera – was responsible for making visible the white walls of the institution that enclosed the artworld all along. Although some great art was produced under the banner of Institutional Critique – Hans Haacke and Andra Fraser being the best exponents – the 'critique' itself became institutionalised: art was unveiled as fully internalised. Looking back at the periods of Institutional Critique during the '60s, early '70s and '80s, it would not be an act of cynicism to describe all waves combined as an overlong self-reflective therapy session. After all, most of its practitioners have ended up displayed in the very site that they were critiquing, the mother of all institutions, the museum. Furthermore, as the administration of aesthetics<sup>2</sup> is part and parcel of art production via the ever-evolving art institution and curator alike,



it seems that being fluent in the modi of Institutional Critique helps those that are so inclined navigate better the administrative space of contemporary art.

The double bind provoked by Klute's equivocal representation of FSAS fictional signage – signification swerving from a local to national emergency – is a fine analogy for how perceptually relevant discourse traverses the artworld from the centre to the periphery, even when it has no real bearing on the local art scene. Just recently I was shocked to read in *Frieze* magazine the term 'artist-run spaces' casually substituted for "artist-run institutions"<sup>3</sup> Perhaps I am behind the times, but I cannot bear to label voluntarily administrated art spaces as institutions, even though the artists and curators behind such spaces have their own agency in play just like everyone else. Of course critics and curators alike jump on the homogenising bandwagon as soon as *Art Monthly*, *Artforum*, *Text Zur Kunst*, *e-flux* etcetera spin the discursive wheel to land on whatever components make up art discourse of the time, whether that be art criticism, art market, curatorial agency, education, feminism, they will all have their turn of what is a self-perpetuating discourse. Just wait, in time the term 'artist-run institutions' will be standard.

Perception was also in play when the subject of the 'crisis of criticism' filled Irish institutional seminar rooms between 2010-2011, only because the 'crisis' was being discussed elsewhere by bigger fish. The discursive pandemic of the moment is the corrupted art market, resulting in one of the foremost American art critics, Dave Hickey, retiring from the artworld, opining that rich collectors are "in the hedge fund business, so they drop their windfall profits into art. [...] Art editors and critics – people like me – have become a courtier class. All we do is wander around the palace and advise very rich people."<sup>4</sup> The artworld that Hickey is fed up with is not the artworld that most of us know or want to know. In his estimation the artworld is one expansive centre wherein the art market manipulates the strings (because collectors hold the pursestrings). His lambasting of this so-called "palace" bejeweled in oily dollar bills only proves that Hickey is a victim of his own success; he tried on the ruby slippers but the gout from overindulging in the rich food of too many collectors' dinner parties has cemented them on. For Hickey it seems there is no way back to the initial impetus that compelled him to write on art in the first instance. More often than not crises in the artworld are academically posited, formulated for either discourse for discourse's sake or built on the perception of hierarchical microcosms that perpetuate such discursive crises (like Hickey's microcosmic palace where critic and collector walk hand-in-hand). Unfortunately, these crises eventually trickle down from the centre to the periphery.

Drawing your attention back to Vera Klute's creative response to being a resident artist at FSAS – an artwork that is built on the individual perception of the artist – the question of Time with regard to the artist and institution is proffered. There is a sense that Time is shooting by at the speed of light outside Klute's *Rear Window* with the fiery elements of joyride, burnt-out car and emergency. While behind the pane of glass of Klute's studio window, Time stands still; literally so in the artist's capturing of the riotous scene as a series of still images. Generally speaking, Time is also at the heart of the artist's and the institution's sustainability, but how Time is processed and managed by both is in polar opposition to one another. There are the short-term goals of artists, whereby artworks are developed at breakneck

speeds as if the Langoliers<sup>5</sup> are hot on the artist's heels. This inflated creative production is so the artist can plan ahead of time in order to keep visible and relevant (but not too visible!). In stark contrast, however, the long-term agenda of art institutions like FSAS is to expand, whereby generations of artists are recycled via the time limit of the residency. There is certainly a long/short haul dichotomy at play here between institution and artist.

Klute's *Rear Window* unavoidably articulates a dysfunctional society, but also exposes art as being passive, even non-functional. Whereas Hitchcock's *Rear Window* (1954) is a *mise-en-scène* of a bourgeois work-in-progress crime, wherein the disabled protagonist is actively involved in the solution to the crime, Klute's scene after the crime is what Marx would describe as blatantly Lumpenproletariat. Both 'Rear Windows' perform binocular voyeurism that posit the ethics of being witness to a crime but not acting: what the female lead in Hitchcock's thriller phrases as "rear window ethics". Such voyeurism conveys the all too human desire to get close as possible to a visceral happening without getting your hands dirty, and in the context of Klute's representation, deems the social function of art as looking, not acting. However, as the New York-based art collective Bruce High Quality Foundation proclaim, art's uselessness is something that should be celebrated and retained in a capitalist system that feeds off functionality.

Klute's *Rear Window* is also located in the hinterland of what is historically defined as the institution, because it was not conceived with the predetermined belief of being exhibited in a gallery or museum. While sitting in the FSAS office with Liz Burns and Clodagh Kenny, however, and discussing what the term institution means today, I am not so sure that the very notes that I am jotting down are not already institutionalised. Let's not forget, when Andy Warhol named his studio The Factory in the early '60s art was metaphorically named and shamed as an institution. Michael Asher, conceptual artist and apostle of Institutional Critique wrote: "what is announced and perceived as art is always already institutionalized, simply because it exists within the perception of participants in the field of art as art."<sup>6</sup>

With a similar matter-of-fact attitude, Simon Sheikh writes that "The institution was posed as a problem (for artists). In contrast, the current institutional-critical discussions seem predominantly propagated by curators and directors of the very same institutions, and they are usually opting for rather than against them. That is, they are not an effort to oppose or even destroy the institution, but rather to modify and solidify it. The institution is not only a problem, but also a solution!"<sup>7</sup> In the 'real world' institutions are defined as self-organising collectives – the small print reads: 'individuals may apply but a collective will be begotten'. In the artworld, however, individualism is still coveted, even under the guise of an institutional marriage with an art scene, collective, gallery, curator, or studio. With regard to the perception of an institution like FSAS, there is no arguing the fact that artists' studios in general are built on one of the main tenets of the institution – hierarchical bias through a highly competitive selection process. But without such institutions that facilitate, sustain, and support the careers of quality artists, the local art scene would lack a professional and aspirational apex. Sheikh's criticism of the propagation of the institution by curators and directors can be



upended. Another way to look at the role of the institution in such politically and economically tumultuous times is through Andrea Fraser's advocacy of Hans Haacke's praxis: "Haacke's project has been an attempt to defend the institution of art from instrumentalization by political and economic interests."<sup>8</sup> For the sake of art it is better to concede to an institutionally anchored artworld rather than an ideological, unregulated bohemia. Institutions like FSAS, which are not compromised by gallery space politics, and collaborate with other art institutions through lateral projects, eg Arts & Disability Ireland (ADI), function as interlockers of the local art scene that, without, would descend into a mediocracy.

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1 Andrea Fraser, 'From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique', *Artforum*, New York: September, 2005, Vol. 44, p. 278.

2 Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, 'Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions', *October*, Vol. 55. (Winter, 1990), pp. 105-143.

3 Alexander Provan, 'All for One: What makes a successful artist-run institution?', *Frieze*, Issue 153, March 2013. [<http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/all-for-one/>]

4 Edward Helmore and Paul Gallagher, 'Doyen of American critics turns his back on the "nasty, stupid" world of modern art', *The Guardian*, Sunday 28 October, 2012.

5 The Langoliers is a novella, and one of four works published in the Stephen King book *Four Past Midnight* (1990). Langoliers themselves are creatures that devour the past as soon as the present has passed, therefore, the idea of time travel is an effort to revisit past lives is impossible as only a void exists.

6 Andrea Fraser, op.cit.

7 Simon Sheikh, 'Notes on Institutional Critique', 2006: [<http://eipcp.net/transversal/0106/sheikh/en>]

8 Cited in Andrea Fraser, op.cit.