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The Rise and Fall of New Institutionalism

Perspectives on a Possible Future

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Only a few years ago, “new institutionalism” was recognized in a curatorial intention to create “an active space” that is “part community center, part laboratory and part academy”, attributes I am quoting from the profile of the Rooseum in Malmö, which – under the directorship of Charles Esche and later Lene Crone Jensen – was one of the model institutions of this new experimental and multi-functional approach to curating. At the zenith of these activities and their discourse Jonas Ekeberg edited a publication with the title “New Institutionalism”, in which he defined this subject as an “attempt to redefine the contemporary art institution [...] ready to let go, not only of the limited discourse of the work of art as a mere object, but also of the whole institutional framework that went with it”, stating that it was “far from peripheral, but rather central, even crucial, to the contemporary art scene.”[1] What Rooseum and other progressive art institutions had in common was that they were institutions of critique, which means institutions that have internalized the institutional critique that was formulated by artists in the 1970s and 90s and developed an auto-critique that is put forward by curators in the first place. Curators no longer just invited critical

artists, but were themselves changing institutional structures, their hierarchies, and functions. Reacting to the current developments, "institutions of critique", from the mid- or late-nineties onwards, employed a criticism of globalized corporate institutionalism and its consumer audience.

Since then, within a very short space of time these approaches, although successful in terms of opening up to new local publics and gaining international recognition in the art world, have been cut down to size and things have changed dramatically. Let me give you a few more examples: In 2004, during my time as a curator for NIFCA, the Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art, I worked with the Swedish artists Mike Bode and Staffan Schmidt on the project "*Spaces of Conflict. An audio-visual, research-based essay on institutional spaces*".[2] The project was based on close co-operations and exchange with curators and directors of seven international institutions in Berlin, Oslo, Copenhagen, Vilnius, Malmö and Helsinki. It is remarkable that almost all the institutions portrayed by Bode and Schmidt – the Rooseum, Kunst-Werke Berlin, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Oslo, the Contemporary Art Center in Vilnius, Kunsthalle Helsinki, the x-room in Copenhagen and NIFCA itself – are now in a period of profound change that demands a radical change of political course: The Rooseum is becoming a branch of the expanding Moderna Museet in Stockholm; the Museum of Contemporary Art in Oslo has been merged with other national museums in Oslo under the umbrella of the National Museum for Contemporary Art, Architecture and Design; Vilnius is suffering from severe budget cuts; in several places curators and directors have been replaced, which has a huge impact on the programmatic approach of the institutions, and in the case of NIFCA itself the institution has

even been closed down. Most of the institutions seem to have been put in their place like insubordinate teenagers.

What is not wanted, in short, is criticality. Criticality didn't survive the "corporate turn" in the institutional landscape. This is not only due to the larger institutions that are run like a branded global company in an obvious way, like the Guggenheim, which provides the clearest example of how an institution is conceived and staged by politicians and sponsors. More and more this also applies to mid-sized and smaller institutions, such as the German Kunstvereine or art associations, which are supposed to be experimental, but find themselves increasingly forced into curating programs similar to an established Kunsthalle.

This situation raises some crucial questions: What is "new institutionalism" today? Is there still anything like an institution of critique, and what does it mean in the present context? Can the discussion of the conditions of production be carried out within the institutions themselves, and what are the consequences for their internal structures, functionality, programming and projections? Or, to quote Hito Steyerl: "is it not rather absurd to argue that something like an institution of critique exists, at a time when critical cultural institutions are clearly being dismantled, underfunded, and subjected to the demands of a neoliberal event economy?"[3]

This current situation, which goes hand in hand with the dismantling of the welfare state, produces an urgent need for emancipatory forms of action in the institutionalized art field and hereby for new institutions. This brings us back, first of all, to a fundamental question: What do we actually expect from an art institution? What do we want an institution to stand for? What desires does an institution in the art field produce? In his essay for

the publication "Art and its Institutions", the Swedish philosopher Sven-Olov Wallenstein analyzed "institutional desires" that are connected with art institutions, and reveals a profound paradox by asking: "Why is there such a desire for institutions, and why does the very attempt to meet it only give rise to more dissatisfaction?" Referring to Guattari, he concludes that "the need for facilities is an illusion, or rather a retroactive *rationalization*." Instead it is the very institution which – as he continues - "produces a certain structure of desire, it enables a certain space where signifiers and desires can circulate, and in this sense it is just as futile to dream of a fully de-institutionalized space as it is to dream of an institution that would work."[4] While you can't beat this argument on the one hand, on the other the conclusion cannot be – as Wallenstein also says – to leave institutions completely aside in order to enter alternative spheres. I fully agree with the artist Gardar Eide Einarsson, who says, "It is a classical democratic problem, whether one should engage in order to change, or simply ignore in order to establish something else on the outside (the classical and in my view false distinction between alternative and oppositional)."[5]

In the face of this dilemma, what is therefore required is the establishment of transgressive institutions that question and break with the current developments of privatization and simultaneously orient themselves towards other disciplines and areas besides the corporative business of globalized capitalism.

In search of participatory institution-forming activities, my attention has recently turned to the institutional situation in several regions in the southern hemisphere. There the few official contemporary art institutions mostly are inaccessible for young artists and dysfunctional as part of the public sphere, and artists and curators don't have easy access to public or private funding. These kinds of local situations where there is a lack of access to

institutional infrastructure often give rise to community projects, that are characterized by their institution-forming character, such as Sarai or Khoj in Delhi, PUKAR and crit in Mumbai, or ruangrupa in Jakarta. You often find collective and occasionally interdisciplinary activities by artists, sometimes together with curators, researchers, activists or new media workers. They start with a small space and very local programming, exhibiting their own work and that of artists they know, or using the space for other community activities such as discussions or parties. In the beginning there is thus a kind of community center or hang-out for friends from the art field. In the regions I am talking about these activities are assuming a quasi-institutional status that often goes hand in hand with an expansion of their activity. They then start to fundraise internationally, to set up residencies, offer research possibilities, invite foreign curators and artists, organize film programs, edit magazines and so on.

In my opinion, what institutions in western countries need to do is precisely to reduce the number of structures and standards, and disengage spaces from too many codes and contexts. Here, where we have an institutionalized art field – and consequently the opportunities to participate in semi-public spaces, but also the difficulties caused by the control mechanisms of these spaces – the options are somewhat different. Here there are inherently many categories and conventions for all kinds of art spaces, and alternatives are always measured against the official system that already exists and is increasingly defined by the politics of city marketing and sponsorship. It may seem paradoxical, but from this perspective, in fact we have less scope here and more control. Therefore, a conceivable new institution of critique would be one that maintains and expands its participation in (semi-) public

space, and at the same time creates free unbranded spaces and negates dependencies.

It could counter the corporate globalization that neo-capitalism created, instead enabling an active and immediate global exchange of diverse public groups and individual voices, and a critique of the nation-state. It would have to widen its scope, consider cross-genre collaborations with established as well as alternative organizations, and initiate multi-disciplinary activities. This conceivable critical institution could, for example, take on the form of an internationally operating "organized network", which strengthens various smaller, independent institutions and activities – be they alternative, artist-run, or research-based – and could also set up temporary platforms within bigger institutions. Ned Rossiter describes the potential of "organized networks" for superseding modern institutions that are just "rebooted into the digital age" by "reconciling their hierarchical structures of organization with the flexible, partially decentralized and transnational flows of culture, finance and labor." The advantage of "organized networks" instead is the way they function as "social-technical forms that co-emerge with the development of digital information and communication technologies."[6] In the art field this new institution of organized collaborations could serve then as an information pool, a hub for various transdisciplinary forms of collaboration, in legal matters as a union, and as an entry for audiences to participate locally and exchange internationally.

The transformative public potential of an institution so structured lies in creating "diasporic public spheres", that are described by Arjun Appadurai – who like Ned Rossiter derives his transferable model from an analysis of the globalized use of electronic media – as "phenomena that confound theories that depend on the continued salience of the nation-state as the key arbiter of

important social changes."[7] Precisely in this lies both an internationalization as well as a democratization of the art institution and its research facilities, which not only breaks down or questions certain dominant forms of institutional politics, but also opens up a "new role for the imagination in social life."[8] On the level of funding, ground-breaking new private as well as public foundations are required to create self-sustainable, independent and powerful alternatives – a "globalization from below", if you will.

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[1] Joans Ekeberg (Ed.), New Institutionalism, Versted#1, Office for Contemporary Art, Norway, Oslo 2003, cit. from Introduction p. 9 and 14.

[2] See also a more detailed description of the project: http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0106/moentmann/en

[3] Hito Steyerl, The Institution of Critique, http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0106/steyerl/en

[4] Sven-Olov Wallenstein, Institutional Desires, in: Nina Möntmann (Ed.), Art and Its Institutions, London (Black Dog Publishing) 2006, 114-123, cit. p.121.

[5] Gardar Eide Einarsson, as quoted by Rebecca Gordon-Nesbitt, Harnessing the Means of Production, in: Jonas Ekeberg (Ed.), New Institutionalism, Verkstedt #3/OCA, Oslo 2003, pp. 59-87, cit. p. 83.

[6] Ned Rossiter, Can Organized Networks Make Money for Designers? (http://summit.kein.org/node/309). See also: Ned Rossiter, Organized Networks. Media Theory, Creative Labour, New Institutions, Rotterdam 2006.

[7] Arjun Appadurai, “Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination”, in, *Globalization,* ed. Arjun Appadurai, (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2001), p. 4.

[8] Appadurai 2001, p. 4.