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Internalisation of the Discourse of Institutional Critique and its Unhappy Consciousness

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The vicious cycle of institutional critique stems from its dichotomous nature. It inevitably entails a certain position that exists outside or beyond any institution in contrast to the criticised institutional position. It implies a severe critique of the supposedly autocratic (powerful) institutions and their governance, in contrast to preferred democratic (weak) institutions that by all accounts are expected to deal with art and cultural production in a more creative and liberal way. I want to argue that because of this dichotomy any institutional critique's discourse paradoxically becomes dangerously internalised, similarly to the biopower and biopolitics that are initially its targets. [1]

I am interested in tackling the set of questions that derive from such an intrinsically dichotomous split within institutional critique, which results in an "unhappy consciousness." Hegel called this kind of divided mode of consciousness the "unhappy consciousness", because the self is in conflict with itself when there is no unity between self and other. [2] This "unhappy consciousness" of the institutional critique is the institutional

consciousness that is conscious of itself as being divided internally and as not being able to reconcile itself with its "other" – the institutional system. On the other hand, the undivided consciousness would be a dual self-consciousness which brings unity to the self and the "other". In this text I want to argue that what stands behind the "unhappy consciousness" of the institutional critique *is* the performative contradiction of contemporary society today that prevents such unity from taking place.

However, the question to be asked here is, what if such a completely independent position of institutional critique (beyond any institution) can not exist; what if one can utter relevant statements only when there is a certain institutional framework (weak or strong) from which position one speaks? Does this indicate that the position of any institutional critique is that of a double dialectics, always already simultaneously self-legitimising and self-legitimated and therefore strong but questionable in implying the oppositional shortcomings exactly because of relying on self-legitimated strength?

The main paradox of the institutional critique is that at first sight it seems as though a position like this implies that because of this *performative contradiction* any institutional critique is *always already* impossible, a *posited contradiction* within itself, in which the interlocutors are entrapped since they deny the possibility for communication and understanding. [3] However, even if it were so, it would be relevant to discuss the potentialities for other possible directions in transitional institutional critique in the context of the countries of South-East Europe.

Let me give you the good news now: what could demonstrate more clearly that institutional critique is still possible and very

much alive than the fact that individuals and communities still step aside from the society, pass judgment on it, and break free from the bonds of ideology. By questioning and pursuing truth these "rebels" seek to achieve a kind of institutional emancipation.

If we try to recuperate the need for institutional critique in the post-socialist context from this perspective, despite all the contradictions, the question from which political or social position such institutional critique would speak becomes crucial (much more relevant than any professional position). Because of the crisis of legitimation and state authority in the transitional period, institutional critique became possible in more general and political terms, and not only in terms of art or cultural institutions. Therefore, it became increasingly significant whether institutional critique is understood as:

- a singular position of an artist, art critic or cultural producer
- a position of a self-organised community of art and culture producers
- a neo-liberal governmental position
- a conservative (nationalist) critique, or
- a non-governmental – democratic civic society organisation.

It is important to emphasise that even though each of the above mentioned positions entails a different starting point, some of the objectives of these different positions overlap and intertwine. Institutional critique can only have a relevant impact on society as a whole, if the agents of institutional critique are aware that their questions are formulated from a certain institutional platform.

However, a more difficult expectation is that the common objectives can gather together the different camps of institutional critique. Self-consciousness has a certain otherness included within

itself, in that the self is conscious of what is other than itself. Self-consciousness on the part of institutional critique is contradictory, because it is conscious of both sameness and otherness. The contradictions of governmentality, self-governance and self-organisation are only a few of these contradictions. The fundamental challenge of each government is how to govern but not too much or, as Michel Foucault famously put it: 'The suspicion that one always risks governing too much is inhabited by the question: Why, in fact one must govern?...In other words, what makes it necessary for there to be a government, and what ends should it pursue with regard to society in order to justify its existence?'[4] The "art of government" for Foucault is actually something that does not entail any universalised distinction between different governing systems. 'Instead of making the distinction between state and civil society into a historical universal that allows us to examine all the concrete systems, we can try to see it as a form of schematization characteristic of a particular technology of government.' [5]

According to Gerald Raunig 'not only resistive individuals, but also progressive institutions and civil society NGOs operate on the same plane of governmentality.' [6] The main attribute of parrhesia is not the possession of truth, which is made public in a certain situation, but the taking of a risk, the 'fact that a speaker says something dangerous - something other than what the majority believes.'[7] Raunig actually refers to Foucault's statement that distinguishes between the "classical Greek conception of *parrhesia*" – constituted by those who dare "to tell the truth to *other people*" and a new truth game which entails being "courageous enough to disclose the truth about *oneself*." [8]

The activity of uttering truth is much more important than truth put in opposition to the lie or to something "false".

> Criticism, and especially institutional critique, is not exhausted in denouncing abuses nor in withdrawing into more or less radical self-questioning. In terms of the art field that means that neither the belligerent strategies of the institutional critique of the 1970s nor art as a service to the institution in the 1990s promise effective interventions in the governmentality of the present. [9]

According to Raunig, a productive game emerges through the relationship between activists and institution so that social criticism and institutional critique intertwine the political and personal *parrhesia*. It is only by linking the two *parrhesia* techniques that a one-sided instrumentalisation can be avoided, that the institutional machine is saved from closing itself off, that the flow between movement and institution can be maintained.

In addition to Raunig's proposal of applying *parrhesia* as a double strategy (as an attempt to engage in a process of refutation and as self-questioning), I would suggest that the dialogical critique offers a more appropriate model of institutional critique in terms of positive agency of action. I suggest that a kind of deconstruction of the one-way critique inherited from the models of institutional critique from the 1970s and 1990s would entail a collaborative policy that could engage both state and independent institutions in the same critical projects in order to suggest and promote institutional activity as constructive institutional self-developing criticality.

Instead of assuming that the institution has internalised power through the instruments of governing only because it is an

institution with a higher position in the hierarchy, perhaps it would be more constructive to remember that the institutions of power are all around us and that biopolitics reaches much further than only within its own institution. Acknowledging this complex entanglement of power, its institutions and its critique could bring us closer to a sober and refined critical position that would be up capable of an institutional critique of today, in which process different institutions could contribute both by critiquing the others' practices, but also with a self-critical approach.

Institutional Critique as the Internalisation of Power and Politics

The internalisation of institutional critique is a two way street:

- on the one hand institutions very quickly internalise the critique aimed and addressed to them: by appropriating the same vocabulary as their critics and by superficially incorporating the new structures, the criticised institutions become stronger although still continuing working under the same rules as before. An institution constructs itself only after being interpolated by a relevant critical opposition.

- on the other hand critics themselves internalise institutional power by repeating their own criticism time and again, which then starts to rule their own activities, and thus they become gate-keepers and agents of a negation that is a different kind of power by using similar methods under the pretext of protection from the powerful institutions

In particular, the shift in the institutional critique can be discussed by taking into consideration the shift of the role of the contemporary art museums in SEE and the change of their monopoly position in the regional art scene under the influence of

individuals or the appearance of independently run non-governmental art spaces. Such changes mainly occurred because of the new critical curatorial practices that already started to be carefully nurtured in the early 90s by small but very active art institutions.

It is important to stress the fact that in the beginning most of these new initiatives, especially the appearance of the Soros Contemporary Art Centres and their spin offs, were seen as urgently needed means to balance, contest or even confront the monopoly of the powerful state governed and supported art institutions. Their important political agenda was to stand up against communist ideology and for an *open society* by purportedly promoting new art media. [10] However, there were examples where some ambiguous unwritten agreement took place between the *centre* and *margin*, between the *centre* and *alternative*. Therefore the internalisation of institutional critique on the part of these new institutional models for almost a decade threatened to become an even more centralised monopoly of power, at least in the cultural environments where the state institutions collaborated closely with their critical counterparts.

The most interesting example of this kind of merging of state power and oppositional institutional critique was the collaboration between the Soros Contemporary Art Centre Skopje and the Skopje Museum of Contemporary Art that started with the very beginning of the activities of the SCCA-Skopje in 1994. At that time the Museum of Contemporary Art was at its undisputed acme as the leader in the representation of international contemporary art in Skopje and the only institution professionally capable of representing Macedonian contemporary art abroad.

The Museum of Contemporary Art was established in1964 as a political decision put forward with an Act of the Skopje City Assembly, in order to host the collection of art works that hundreds of international artists donated to the city immediately after the catastrophic 1963 Skopje earthquake. With an exhibition area of over 3500 m2 and a total area of 5000 m2 with depots, cinema, archives, library and other rooms serving the purpose of this exceptionally important cultural institution, the new museum building opened in 1970 as one of few museums of contemporary art in the region. [11] The project of the museum building itself was also a donation to the city by the Polish architects J. Mokrzynski, E. Wierzbicki and W. Klyzewski.

However, by 1994 the building of the museum that always struggled with managing its assets was run down due to the continuation of the long established poor policy of re-directing the funds assigned for acquisitions and maintenance of the building into programming. For example, the museum's decision from 2000 to use the maintenance funds to cover the expenses of an exhibition in Japan and the decision to build a café with the rent received for a wedding party held in the museum in 1998 instead of using the money to repair the roof led to a real catastrophe. For more than fifteen years the whole collection was and still is out of sight, and due to the construction problems with the leaking roof, not only did the collection have to be moved to dump storage, but it is also more and more often the case that most of the important long-term collaborators – international foundations and museums – give up collaboration because of the risk of showing larger and expensive exhibitions in such conditions. [12] The first serious reconstruction of the building started only recently with the support from the Italian Government, but the question remains

about the condition of the works that were held in terrible conditions in the depot for more than fifteen years. [13]

This policy of self-promotion on the part of the museum's curatorial team and of support for only a handful of favourite artists, gradually resulted in the building and the institution itself becoming completely marginalised by both society and the public. The attempts of independent artists or critics raise critical voices against this kind of centralised power under the auspices of democratisation were isolated and condemned to failure from the start. After several unsuccessful critical attempts led to an immediate marginalisation of the art scene, entertaining any institutional critique in Skopje became to the equivalent of signing a social and professional estrangement or even suicide. On the one hand, the artists and critics that would act in any kind of critical fashion were regarded as ineligible for any projects. On the other hand criticality became a vicious cycle for most of the critical voices that were prevented from undertaking any creative actions because of the frustration caused by this vicious cycle, where alleged institutional critique teamed up with institutional power. [14]

The best example of this perverted game was the aforementioned establishment of the Soros Centre for Contemporary Art – Skopje that was promoted as a kind of alternative to the Museum of Contemporary Art. However, instead of offering an alternative to the other artists and institutions, when the SCCA-Skopje and the Skopje Museum of Contemporary Art joined forces in the early 90s, it brought even more power to the museum. Of course, there would have been nothing wrong with this, had it not directly affected the larger art scene in Macedonia. Mainly because of the monopolised power in showing contemporary art there was hardly any criticism addressed towards the problematic art and cultural policy entertained by the museum. Exhibiting within its program

even became impossible for the artists interested in issues that were not on the MOCA/SCCA agenda (e.g. large scale accumulation installations or electronic arts).

Today many things have changed. The weakening of the SCCA-Skopje due to the loss of support from its main benefactor and the right-wing nationalistic cultural policy of the governing coalition that puts more emphasis on national heritage and archeology but less on contemporary art worsened the situation in another direction, towards the decline of the once untouchable monopoly. Paradoxically, this deteriorated situation in the museum opened up a possibility for new kinds of non-institutional or different institutional art practices.

Some recent collaborations between the state and non-governmental initiatives are especially relevant here. Similarly to already known independent and alternative spaces, such as kuda in Novi Sad, p74 in Ljubljana, WHW in Zagreb, Remont in Belgrade, in Skopje the way that press to exit project space in Skopje, Tocka Cultural Centre, CK, and other projects function is that they tend to overcome the *performative contradiction* in institutional critique and its *unhappy consciousness,* thus producing art projects that deal with institutional critique in a more positive and visionary way.[15] Instead of critiquing, complaining or nagging, the new generation of artists and *artivists,* with the support of many different funding sources and foreign institutions, became aware that their committed art activities are perhaps the most productive institutional critique that may ultimately lead towards self-parrhesia.

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[1] Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri, *Empire,* London: Harvard University Press, 23-27.

[2] Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, *Phenomenology of Spirit,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979, 119-139.

[3] Habermas, Jürgen, "Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification" in Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. C. Lenhardt and S.W. Nicholsen (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), 89.

[4] Foucault, Michael, *Ethics,* Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Editor: Paul Rabinow, New York: The New Press, 1997, 74-75.

[5] Foucault 75.

[6] Raunig, Gerald, 'The Double Criticism of *parrhesia:* Answering the Question "What is a Progressive (Art) Institution?"' 18 September 2007 < http://eipcp.net/transversal/0504/raunig/en/>.

[7] Raunig, 'The Double Criticism'.

[8] Michel Foucault, *Diskurs und Wahrheit*, Berlin 1996, p.14 (cf. discussion of *parrhesia* in English: <http://foucault.info/documents/parrhesia/>, 150, quoted from Raunig, 'The Double Criticism of *parrhesia*'.

[9] Raunig, 'The Double Criticism'.

[10] George Soros, the main funder of the *Open Society Foundations* that started emerging throughout Eastern

Europe in the early 90s and of their spin offs such as the Soros Centres for Contemporary Art, is a controversial figure with an overtly problematic philanthropic image. Beside the intellectual aura owing to Soros' friendship and obsession with the philosopher Karl Popper, there are many financial scandals that cast doubt on his philanthropic motives. Interestingly enough, his name appeared in one of Mark Lombardi's charts of the flow of capital: Mark Lombardi, *George W. Bush, Harken Energy, and Jackson Stephens*, ca. 1979-90 (5th version).

[11] Today the stock of donated works consists of around 4600 art works by several hundred artists in various media, but acquisitions are rare and incidental. The works by internationally well-known artists are of special importance, but most of the works that are now in the museum depot either belong to early modernism (Jan Štursa, Václav Spála, Emil Filla, František Muzika, Jindrich Stýrský, Vojtech Preissig) or date from 1950s -1970s: Fernand Léger, André Masson, Pablo Picasso, Hans Hartung, Victor Vasarely, Alexander Calder, Pierre Soulages, Henryk Staževski, Alberto Burri, Christo, Enrico Bay, Robert Jacobsen, Etienne Hajdu, Zoltan Kemeny, Robert Adams, Emilio Vedova, Antoni Clavé, Georg Baselitz...

[12] There is a series from 2004 of ten digital photographs "Legend About the "legen" (Mac. bucket) that the artist Sašo Stanojkoviќ made on the upper floor of the Museum of Contemporary Art. The photographs show the colourful plastic bucket installation that was "hosted" by the museum for almost fifteen years instead of the collection (reproduced in *Contemporary,* London, No.70, 2005, 20.)

Taking into account that floods of dirty 'rivers' are frequent sights in the museum after each rainy day, some projects exhibited in the

museum (such as *Mozart's Boat* by Antoni Maznevski, consisting of a 6.5 m wooden boat), sounded like a bad joke.

[13] The fact that the director newly appointed in 2008 comes from the field of theatre management does not give much hope for the future programming, though.

[14] From 10 September to 16 October 1990 a three-month local debate was conducted in Skopje between the author of this text and the museum's curator Viktorija Vasev-Dimeska. The controversy was triggered by a review written on the occasion of the Second Youth Biennial, an exhibition that was curated by Vasev-Dimeska at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Skopje: Suzana Milevska. "The Perfectionism of the Obedient– or why the 2 Youth Biennial looks so classical." *Republika*, 10 September 1990. The text was published in the first independent and privately owned newspaper in Macedonia *Republika*. It was imagined as an attempt to problematise the ideology behind the strictly modernist institutional and cultural policy of the Museum of Contemporary Art, known for continuously neglecting and leaving aside many alternative postmodern artistic practices such as the performances, public painting actions, installation, and concerts by the members of the Macedonian art group "Zero".

[15] The best example is the project "Oskar Hansen's Museum of Modern Art" by Hristina Ivanoska and Yane Calovski, which looks at Hansen's proposal from 1966 that this Polish architect submitted to the open competition for a Museum of Contemporary Art in Skopje led by the Polish Government. The proposal did not win the competition, being imagined as a radical and visionary experiment proposing transformative design. With 12 posters of imagined exhibitions Ivanoska and Calovski simulate an imaginary programme for the museum that was never realised.

“press to exit project space”, 28 September 2007 <http://www.presstoexit.org.mk/LectureAndPresentation/HTML_2007/OlafHansen.html>.