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Instituent Practices

Fleeing, Instituting, Transforming

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Translated by Aileen Derieg

When we posit in our project *transform* the provisional thesis that, following the two phases of institutional critique in the 1970s and the 1990s, a new phase will emerge[1], this thesis is based less on empirical findings than on a political and theoretical necessity, which a look at the deployment of institutional critique makes evident. Both strands of the meanwhile canonized practice of institutional critique had their own strategies and methods conditioned by the context, were simultaneously similar to one another (more similar than the delimitations of the art history canon and the art criticism canon would suggest) and different from one another, depending on the social and political circumstances. In particular, the circumstances have changed tremendously, since Michael Asher, Robert Smithson, Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke, Marcel Broodthaers and others introduced the first wave of what came to be known as institutional critique, which led almost seamlessly into the multiple branches of artistic projects circulating under the same name in the late 1980s and the 1990s. If institutional critique is not to be fixed and paralyzed as something established in the art field and confined within its rules, then it has to continue to develop along with changes in society and especially to tie into other forms of critique both within and outside the art field, such as those arising in opposition to the respective conditions or even before their formations[2]. Against the background of this kind of transversal exchange of forms of critique, but also beyond the imagination of spaces free from domination and institutions, institutional critique is to be reformulated as a critical attitude and as an instituent practice.
In his lecture entitled "Qu'est-ce que la critique?" in 1978, Michel Foucault described the spread and replication of governmentality in Western Europe in the 16th century, claiming that along with this governmentalization of all possible areas of life and finally of the self, critique also developed as the art not to be governed *like that*. Even without going into more depth here on the continuities and breaks between the historical forms of developing liberal governmentality and the current forms of neoliberal governmentality[3], it may be said that the relationship between *government* and *not to be governed like that* is still a prerequisite today for reflecting on the contemporary relationship between institution and critique. In Foucault's words: "[...] this governmentalization, which seems to me to be rather characteristic of these societies in Western Europe in the 16th century, cannot apparently be dissociated from the question 'how not be governed?' I do not mean by that that governmentalization would be opposed in a kind of face-off by the opposite affirmation, 'we do not want to be governed, and we do not want to be governed *at all*.' I mean that, in this great preoccupation about the way to govern and the search for the ways to govern, we identify a perpetual question which could be: 'how not be governed *like that*, by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them'."[4]
Here Foucault insists on the shift from a fundamental negation of government toward a maneuver to avoid this kind of dualism: from *not to be governed at all* to *not to be governed like that*, from a phantom battle for a *big other* to a constant struggle in the plane of immanence, which – as I would like to add – is not (solely) actualized as a fundamental critique of institutions, but rather as a permanent process of instituting.
Foucault continues: "And if we accord this movement of governmentalization of both society and individuals the historic dimension and breadth which I believe it has had, it seems that one could approximately locate therein what we could call the critical attitude. Facing them head on and as compensation, or rather, as both partner and adversary to the arts of governing, as an act of defiance, as a challenge, as a way of limiting these arts of governing and sizing them up, transforming them, of finding a way to escape from them or, in any case,

a way to displace them ..."[5]
These latter categories are the ones I want to focus on in terms of the transformation and a further development of the question of contemporary forms of institutional critique: transformations as ways of escaping from the arts of governing, lines of flight, which are not at all to be taken as harmless or individualistic or escapist and esoteric, even if they no longer allow dreaming of an entirely different exteriority. "Nothing is more active than fleeing!", as Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet write[6], and as Paolo Virno echoes almost literally: "Nothing is less passive than the act of fleeing, of exiting."[7]

If "the arts of governing" mean an intertwinedness between governing and being governed, between government and self-government, then "*transforming* the arts of governing" does not consist simply of any arbitrary transformation processes in the most general sense, because transformations are an essential quality of the governmentality setting. It is more a matter of specifically *emancipatory* transformations, and this also rescinds a central aspect of the old institutional critique. Through their emancipatory character these transformations also assume a transversal quality, i.e. their effect goes beyond the particular limitations of single fields.
Counter to these kinds of emancipatory transversal transformations of the "arts of governing", there is a recurring problem in art discourse: that of reducing and enclosing more general questions in one's own field. Even though (self-) canonizations, valorizations and depreciations in the art field – also in debates on institutional critique practices – are often adorned with an eclectic, disparate and contradictory selection of theory imports, these imports frequently only have the function of disposing of specific art positions or the art field. A contemporary variation of this functionalization consists of combining poststructuralist immanence theories with a simplification of Bourdieu's field theory. The theories that argue on the one hand against an outside in the sense of Christian or socialist transcendence, for instance, and on the other for the relative autonomy of the art field, are blurred here into the defeatist statement, "We are trapped in our field" (Andrea Fraser). Even the critical actors of the "second generation" of institutional critique do not appear to be free from these kinds of closure phantasms. Fraser, for instance, conducts an offensive self-historicization in her *Artforum* article "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique" (September 2005) with the help of a brief history of the terms, ultimately limiting all possible forms of institutional critique to a critique of the "institution of art" (Peter Bürger) and its institutions. In reference to Bourdieu, she writes: "... just as art cannot exist outside the field of art, we cannot exist outside the field of art, at least not as artists, critics, curators, etc. And what we do outside the field, to the extent that it remains outside, can have no effect within it. So if there is no outside for us, it is not because the institution is perfectly closed, or exists as an apparatus in a 'totally administered society', or has grown all-encompassing in size and scope. It is because the institution is inside of us, and we can't get outside of ourselves."[8] Although there seems to be an echo of Foucault's concept of self-government here, there is no indication of forms of escaping, shifting, transforming. Whereas for Foucault the critical attitude appears simultaneously as "partner" and as "adversary" of the arts of governing, the second part of this specific ambivalence vanishes in Andrea Fraser's depiction, yielding to a discursive self-limitation, which only just allows reflecting on one's own enclosure. Contrary to all the evidence of the manifold effectivity not only of critical art practices throughout the entire 20th century, she plays a worn-out record: art is and remains autonomous, its function limited to the art field. "With each attempt to evade the limits of institutional determination, to embrace an outside, we expand our frame and bring more of the world into it. But we never escape it."[9]
Yet exactly this would also be a point in Foucault's concept of critique, the critical attitude: instead of inducing the closure of the field with theoretical arguments and promoting this practically, thus carrying out the art of governing, a different form of art should be pushed at the same time which leads to *escaping the arts of governing*. And Foucault is not the only one to introduce these new non-escapist terms of escape. Figures of flight, of dropping out, of betrayal, of desertion, of exodus, these are the figures proposed – especially against cynical or conservative invocations of inescapability and hopelessness – by several different authors as poststructuralist, non-dialectical forms of resistance. With these kinds of concepts Gilles Deleuze, Paolo Virno

and several other philosophers attempt to propose new models of non-representationist politics that can equally be turned against Leninist concepts of revolution as taking over the state and against radical anarchist positions imagining an absolute outside of institutions, as well as against concepts of transformation and transition in the sense of a successive homogenization in the direction of neoliberal globalization. In terms of their new concept of resistance, the aim is to thwart a dialectical idea of power and resistance: a positive form of dropping out, a flight that is simultaneously an instituent practice. Instead of presupposing conditions of domination as an immutable horizon and yet fighting against them, this flight changes the conditions under which the presupposition takes place. As Paolo Virno writes in *The Grammar of the Multitude*, the exodus transforms "the context within which a problem has arisen, rather than facing this problem by opting for one or the other of the provided alternatives."[10]

When figures of flight are imported into the art field, this often leads to the misunderstanding that it involves the subject's personal retreat from the noise and babble of the world. Protagonists such as Herman Melville's "Bartleby" in Deleuze and Agamben or the "virtuoso" pianist Glenn Gould in Virno are seen as personifications of individual resistance and – in the case of Bartleby – of individual withdrawal. In a conservative process of pilferage and reinterpretation, in art-critical discourse these figures are thus so far removed from their starting point that flight no longer implies, as it does with Deleuze, fleeing to look for a weapon. On the contrary, here the old images of retreat into an artist hermitage are re-warmed, which are not only deployed in neo-cultural-pessimistic (art) circles against participative and relational spectacle art, but also against collective interventionist, activist or other experimental strategies; for instance when the head of *Texte zur Kunst*, Isabelle Graw turns to "the model of the preoccupied painter working away in his studio, refusing to give any explanation, ostentatiously not networking, never traveling, hardly showing himself in public", the reason for this is allegedly to prevent the principle of the spectacle from "directly accessing his mental and emotional competencies".[11]

Although Graw refers to Paolo Virno directly before the passage quoted, neither Virno's problematization of the cultural industry nor his concept of exodus tends toward these kinds of bourgeois expectations of salvation by the artist-individual. With the image of the solitary painter, who eludes the "new tendency in capitalism to take over the whole person"[12] by obstinately withdrawing his person, Graw links a contemporary analysis with an ultraconservative consequence. Even after the countless spectacular utilizations of this stereotype, it appears that the same old artist image – counter to Virno's ideas of virtuosity – can today still or once again be celebrated as anti-spectacular.

What the poststructuralist proposals for dropping out and withdrawal involve, however, is anything but this kind of relapse into the celebration of an individual turning away from society. The point is to thwart dichotomies such as that of the individual and the collective, to offensively theorize new forms of what is common and singular at the same time. Particularly Paolo Virno has lucidly developed this idea in *A Grammar of the Multitude*. In allusion to the concept of the General Intellect, which Karl Marx introduced in his *Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy*, Virno posits the concept of the "public intellect". The assumption of Marx' concept indicates that "intellect" is not to be understood here as a competence of an individual, but rather as a shared tie and constantly developing foundation for individuation. Thus Virno neither alludes to media intellectuals in the society of the spectacle, nor to the lofty ideas of the autonomous thinker or painter. That kind of individualized publicity corresponds more to Virno's negative concept of "publicness without a public sphere": "The *general intellect*, or public intellect, if it does not become a *republic*, a public sphere, a political community, drastically increases forms of submission."[13]

Virno focuses, on the other hand, on the social quality of the intellect.[14] Whereas the alienated thinker (or even painter) is traditionally drawn as an individual withdrawing from idle talk, from the noise of the masses, for Virno the noise of the multitude is itself the site of a non-state, non-spectacular, non-representationist public sphere.

This non-state public sphere is not to be understood as an anarchic place of absolute freedoms, as an open field beyond the realm of the institution. Flight and exodus are nothing negative, a reaction to something else, but are instead linked and intertwined with constituent power, re-organizing, re-inventing and instituting.

The movement of flight also preserves these instituent practices from structuralization and closure from the start, preventing them from becoming institution in the sense of constituted power.

What does this mean in relation to the artistic practices of institutional critique? From a schematic perspective, the "first generation" of institutional critique sought a distance from the institution, the "second" addressed the inevitable involvement in the institution. I call this a schematic perspective, because these kinds of "generation clusters" are naturally blurred in the relevant practices, and there were attempts – by Andrea Fraser, for instance – to describe the first wave as being constituted by the second (including herself) and also to attribute to the first phase a similar reflectedness on their own institutionality. Whether this is the case or not, an important and effective position can be attributed to both generations in the art field from the 1970s to the present, and relevance is evident in some cases that goes beyond the boundaries of the field. Yet the fundamental questions that Foucault already implicitly raised, which Deleuze certainly pursued in his Foucault book, are not posed with the strategies of distanced and deconstructive intervention in the institution: Do Foucault's considerations lead us to enclose ourselves more and more in power relations? And most of all, which lines of flight lead out of the dead end of this enclosure?
To make use of Foucault's treatments of this problem for the question of new instituent practices, I would like to conclude this article with a longer recourse to the later Foucault, specifically to his Berkeley lecture series "Discourse and Truth" from fall 1983 and the term *parrhesia* broadly explained there.[15]

Parrhesia means in classical Greek "to say everything", freely speaking truth without rhetorical games and without ambiguity, even and especially when this is hazardous. Foucault describes the practice of parrhesia using numerous examples from ancient Greek literature as a movement from a political to a personal technique. The older form of parrhesia corresponds to publicly speaking truth as an institutional right. Depending on the form of the state, the subject addressed by the *parrhesiastes* is the assembly in the democratic agora, the tyrant in the monarchical court.[16] Parrhesia is generally understood as coming from below and directed upward, whether it is the philosopher's criticism of the tyrant or the citizen's criticism of the majority of the assembly: the specific potentiality of *parrhesia* is found in the unequivocal gap between the one who takes a risk to express everything and the criticized sovereign who is impugned by this truth.

Over the course of time, a change takes place in the game of truth "which – in the classical Greek conception of parrhesia – was constituted by the fact that someone was courageous enough to tell the truth to *other people*. [...] there is a shift from that kind of *parrhesiastic* game to another truth game which now consists in being courageous enough to disclose the truth about *oneself*."[17] This process from public criticism to personal (self-) criticism develops parallel to the decrease in the significance of the democratic public sphere of the agora. At the same time, parrhesia comes up increasingly in conjunction with education. One of Foucault's relevant examples here is Plato's dialogue "Laches", in which the question of the best teacher for the interlocutor's sons represents the starting point and foil. The teacher Socrates no longer assumes the function of the parrhesiastes in the sense of exercising dangerous contradiction in a political sense, but rather by moving his listeners to give account of themselves and leading them to a self-questioning that queries the relationship between their statements (*logos*) and their way of living (*bios*). However, this technique does not serve as an autobiographical confession or examination of conscience or as a prototype of Maoist self-criticism, but rather to establish a relationship between rational discourse and the lifestyle of the interlocutor or the self-questioning person. Contrary to any individualistic interpretation especially of later Foucault texts (imputing a "return to subject philosophy", etc.), here parrhesia is not the competency of a subject, but rather a movement between the position that queries the concordance of *logos* and *bios*, and the position that exercises self-criticism in light of this query

In keeping with a productive interpretation for contemporary institutional critique practices, my aim here is to link the two concepts of parrhesia described by Foucault as a genealogical development, to understand hazardous refutation in its relation to self-revelation. Critique, 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 this 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.

What is needed here and now, is parrhesia as a double strategy: as an attempt of involvement and engagement in a process of hazardous refutation, and as self-questioning.

What is needed, therefore, are practices that conduct radical social criticism, yet which do not fancy themselves in an imagined distance to institutions; at the same time, practices that are self-critical and yet do not cling to their own involvement, their complicity, their imprisoned existence in the art field, their fixation on institutions and the institution, their own being-institution. Instituent practices that conjoin the advantages of both "generations" of institutional critique, thus exercising both forms of parrhesia, will impel a linking of social criticism, institutional critique and self-criticism. This link will develop, most of all, from the direct and indirect concatenation with political practices and social movements, but without dispensing with artistic competences and strategies, without dispensing with resources of and effects in the art field. Here exodus would not mean relocating to a different country or a different field, but betraying the rules of the game through the act of flight: "transforming the arts of governing" not only in relation to the institutions of the art field or the institution art as the art field, but rather as participation in processes of instituting and in political practices that traverse the fields, the structures, the institutions.

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[1]http://transform.eipcp.net/about

[2]On the temporal and ontological antecedence of critique/resistance, cf.: Deleuze, Foucault, 89: "The final word of power is that resistance comes first" (translation modified on the basis of the French original), and Raunig, the chapter "The Primacy of Resistance" in Art and Revolution.

[3]Cf. Lorey, "Governmentality and Self-Precarization: On the Normalization of Culture Producers".

[4]Foucault, *What is Critique?*, 28.

[5] Ibid.

[6]Deleuze/Parnet, *Dialoge*, 45.

[7]Virno, *Grammatik der Multitude*, 97 [http://www.generation-online.org/c/fcmultitude3.htm, 70].

[8]Fraser, "From the Critique of the Institutions to an Institution of Critique", 282.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Virno, *Grammatik der Multitude*, 97 [http://www.generation-online.org/c/fcmultitude3.htm, 70]

[11]Graw, "Jenseits der Institutionskritik", 46 f.; for further critique on Graw's text and the *Texte zur Kunst* issue on institutional critique cf. also Stefan Nowotny, "Anti-Canonization".

[12]Ibid., 47; cf. also the additional critique on Graw's text and the *Texte zur Kunst* issue on institutional critique in Stefan Nowotny, "Anti-canonization".

[13]Virno, *Grammatik der Multitude*, 51 [http://www.generation-online.org/c/fcmultitude3.htm, 41]

[14]I have explained in more detail ideas on the social quality of the intellect together with Klaus Neundlinger in the introduction to the German version of *Grammatik der Multitude*: Klaus Neundlinger/Gerald Raunig, "Einleitung oder die Sprachen der Revolution", in: Virno, *Grammatik der Multitude*, 9-21

[15]I developed the following ideas in 2004 for the eipcp conference in Vienna "Progressive Art Institutions in the Age of the Dissolving Welfare State", and they were first published on the republicart web site under the title "The Double Criticism of parrhesia. Answering the Question, What is a Progressive (Art) Institution?" (http://eipcp.net/transversal/0504/raunig/en)

[16]The oldest example of political parrhesia is that of the figure of Diogenes, who commands Alexander from the precariousness of his barrel to move out of his light. Like the citizen expressing a minority opinion in the democratic setting of the agora, the Cynic philosopher also practices a form of *parrhesia* with respect to the monarch in public.

[17]Foucault, Diskurs und Wahrheit , p. 150 (http://foucault.info/documents/parrhesia/)