

Institutional Mores

by Alex Farquharson

1.

In this text I want to reconsider some of the practices and theories associated with new institutionalism, as it came to known, and then loosen and broaden the terms of that debate in light of more recent experience and different potentialities. This was a debate that began to be codified around 2003 based on the practices of several art institutions at that time. By 2006, some of the curator-directors associated with these developments felt they were in crisis and were being subjected to governmental and bureaucratic repression— funding cuts, forced merger, and closure. For some the answer was to, in a sense, de-institutionalize, to work small, with small numbers of participants, in situations that involved little money, and therefore relatively little political scrutiny; to, perhaps, follow the lead of self-organized groups, often led by artists, whose principle medium was dialogic research and experimental collective learning systems. Activist networks that shared some of the same theoretical reference points were also looked to.

Instead of this exit or exodus from the mainstream, I want to consider how these critical and experimental practices may have proliferated and multiplied amongst more mainstream institutions, and how through this expansion they have acquired different political, ethical and poetic coordinates. I have in mind institutional practices of a certain scale that speak to publics of a certain size —kunsthalle-sized institutions and certain museums of contemporary art.

My initial interest in new institutionalism stemmed from experimental exhibition making—specifically, what happens when the kinds of curatorial innovations brought to bear on individual exhibitions are transposed to the whole institution. What are the stakes for those institutions and their publics? What does it mean for an institution to internalize and commit long term to critical and experimental ways of working with artists, with publics and on itself? How, as a consequence, is the triangular relationship between artist, institution and their publics reconceived, restructured and politicized in these situations, and how might that redefine the publicness of institutions of contemporary art?

I was conscious, then, as I am now, of the my geocultural distance from many of these phenomena and debates. There was little at that time of this kind occurring in Britain (there is more now), and the politics of arts funding in Britain has been very different from those of the social democratic countries of Europe where these practices and discourses have been concentrated. I remain conscious of these circumstantial differences as I re-enter this debate, this time not in an independent capacity, but as an institutional practitioner —as the director of a medium-sized, kunsthalle-type institution in a medium sized, post-industrial city in the UK, which opened four years ago in a new building: Nottingham Contemporary. Later in these reflections I will occasionally draw on our experiences in Nottingham in the hope that they may have some general application to the situations of other more or less like-minded institutions in other regions. While our institution is unique as an assemblage, its constituent parts are variously shared with others and have some precedents.

2.

Inspired by the institutionally-reflexive practices of some artists associated with Relational Aesthetics, as well as successive waves of institutional critique, new institutionalism developed important ways of reconceiving the socio-political function of the art institution. In general terms, this represented a move away from a consumption-based model towards a more discursive one that linked institutional practice to the formation of a critical and plural public sphere. Under new institutionalism the cycle of exhibition programming was no longer the privileged format around which all others revolved. Instead, as Charles Esche wrote on the late Rooseum's website in 2001, the new institution aspired to be "part community centre, part laboratory and part academy, with less need for the established showroom function." In new institutions, closed workshops, artist-designed foyers, longitudinal research projects and performatively-installed archives have been as visible as exhibitions. Exhibition catalogues gave ground to readers and institutional journals. As in the term 'new institutionalism' itself, the prefix 'art' was often absent, and discourses were more often drawn from political philosophy and the social sciences than art history and art theory.

The practical limitation of new institutionalism in its more distilled forms is that it often fails to engage much more than a relatively small, invited knowledge community. New institutionalism often conceives of the social agency of institutions in far wider terms than most conventional art institutions, and yet the actual take-up by these publics, imagined as pluralistic and agonistic (after Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe), is often small and uniform in practice. There is the sense that new institutionalism has a model-like quality, that it is a prototype for a far larger kind of social production that may always remain deferred. In practice new institutions often only engage relatively small constituencies, whose politics and subjectivities remain more or less aligned to those of the institutional actors. Their scale allows them to be highly focused and uncompromising.

There is value in this, I would want to maintain: their small scale and considerable autonomy enables them to work in critically- and experimentally-developed ways, uncompromised by the expectations of large, unknowing audiences and the scrutiny of political stakeholders. Other larger institutions, in turn, may benefit from their experimental and often far-reaching critical work. There should always be room in the infrastructure of public spaces for institutions able to work in laboratory and research-centre like conditions.

But generally speaking, what interests me more is the possibility of working on larger scales, achieving greater visibility, engaging larger and more diverse publics with varying degrees of knowledge of art and its intellectual contexts, and having the opportunity to influence the immediate social environment in which the institution operates. With this scale, come all kinds of expectations and demands: from audiences, non-audiences, funders, tourism administrators, the local media, etc.—all the various social and governmental actors that feel they have a stake in what you do as a consequence of how you are funded. What they might want from you might be quite different from your own motivations and ethics. What follows from this is a continuous process of turning necessity into desire, and this involves a continuous process of negotiation and transformation.

It also means devoting considerable energy to the more mundane areas of a larger institution's infrastructure. It means running a shop or a café well; it means efficiently communicating quite basic visitor information, as well as keeping a large building clean; it means publicizing what you do in and around your city; it means

seeking sponsorship, building partnerships, responding to the reporting regimes of the political structures you are accountable to – all the everyday functions of larger scale institutions; the essential operating system on which the artistic, discursive and participatory work of the institution constantly depends.

3.

What follows is a series of attitudes and techniques that I find helpful when looking to intervene in more mainstream institutional situations and more intense political contexts. Some relate to new institutional approaches, others don't. They all relate to the situation of a medium-to-large scale art institution under some political and bureaucratic scrutiny. They are drawn from observation, relate to current experiences, and are written in the form of maxims in a rather speculative way:

Work on different scales to create spaces for participation. Build those spaces into your program, into your building, for more developed exchange. Do what small, experimental institutions do but in pockets or cells of the larger organization whose other forms of mediation may be orientated towards a larger, more diffuse public. It's through these more intense encounters—varying from, say, five to fifty-five people in a room—that audiences become participants, collaborators even, in the development of what constitutes the institution. Feedback occurs, and the institution can become a mutual learning system—viewers, listeners, become producers. An exhibition, an institution, may listen to its publics. The intellectual work of an exhibition need not finish when it goes live; projects can learn from themselves once public. They can acquire new, unanticipated meanings through the opening up of spaces for exchange in and around them. This process is dynamic and unpredictable, sometimes arising from unexpected subjectivities—very old, very young; people with quite different lives, but with 'equal intelligences' (as Jacques Rancière would put it). This gives rise to new perceptions, as the disciplining of thought and the hierarchizing of identities is undone.

Hospitality. One that Esche and Van Abbemuseum, in particular, have advanced. Be welcoming, particularly if you want to work critically, and you want what your institution produces to challenge normative wisdom, to open up new regions of thought. Try to make people feel welcome—whatever they are, whatever they are—by communicating generously. All we should look for in return for hospitality is curiosity and an open mind. Work on the assumption that everyone is invited, and what you do is for anyone at all; that art, and the thinking its gives rise to, cuts across the ways societies are segmented as markets, bracketed by class, known by power. I try to work from the assumption that the reception of art, at its best, undoes forms of identity overly determined by power, whether corporate or governmental; that it gives rise to new subjectivities and conditions of inter-subjectivity.

Generosity follows on from hospitality and the publicness of publicly-funded institutions. We are living in a new era of Enclosure: enclosures of knowledge, information, language, signs, culture, plant species, DNA and digital space. As public institutions we should be true to our publicness by distributing knowledge that has been publicly paid for. Like many other institutions these days, at Nottingham Contemporary we distribute the knowledge produced by and for the institution freely, whenever we can—by recording and uploading our talks, seminars and conferences along with the writing we commission. In this way websites can function as second venues, offering access to the knowledge the institution produces beyond the constraints of geography and time. A Commons approach can also be extended to the physical spaces and resources of art institutions, putting at people's disposal the

backstory, the research tools, that inform the conception of a given project. By situating all the books and journals we use in our research in The Study—our resource room adjoining our exhibition spaces—we share the same space as visitors when we research; front and backstage meet and the customary divisions between the producers and publics of institutions dissolve a little.

Transdisciplinarity: art isn't just 'post-medium' anymore (as Donald Judd put it), it is 'post-discipline' (as in the writings of Dan Graham and Robert Smithson, for example). For Rancière the two go hand-in-hand: "contemporary art is, quintessentially, art defined by the erasure of medium specificity, indeed by the erasure of the visibility of art as a distinct practice [...] [It is] particularly receptive to thought that shatter[s] the boundaries that separate specialists—of philosophy, art, social sciences, etc." Art since at least the 1990s has acted as a dissolving agent on disciplinary and professional borders.

The consequences of art's post- or transdisciplinarity are far reaching for institutions. In following the lead of artists, institutions can open up public platforms for intellectual exchange of virtually unlimited social reach. By working alongside academics and universities, art institutions can open up public spheres for intellectual energies otherwise confined to the heterotopia of campuses. By following art across the divisions of disciplines, and by doing so multiplying the number of an institution's interlocutors, debates can occur on a complex horizontal level, as opposed to a vertical pedagogic axis, with the institution above and the public below, based on relative knowledge or ignorance of a single discipline.

Yes: As an art institution, exceed what is expected of you, but do it in your own way, and according to your own values. Exceeding expectations is the most certain way of evading instrumentalization and gaining relative autonomy—you may even be turned to for solutions. The imposed goals and targets, in themselves, are often in themselves desirable anyway (such as large audience figures and socio-economic stimulus); it's what form that action then takes and what it can be made to mean that becomes critical. Try to say 'yes' to political or public expectations whenever you can, but convert these agendas to something more radical and unexpected. Achieve large new audiences, for example, through what it is you do: the art you work with, the knowledge you produce, the debates you engender, the spaces for participation you open up, rather than succumbing the logic of the retail and entertainment industries. In doing this, introduce different ways of thinking into the larger life of your city or local environment, to those with power and the wider populace. Adopting the principle of the Trojan horse—again, following the lead of artists—smuggle something inspired into normative and predictable ways of doing things. Choose your battles carefully and sparingly. Try to harness larger energies, and convert them from conservative to progressive ones.

Popularity: Finally, don't be afraid of popularity, and don't confuse it with populism. In being critical, let's not forget pleasure.

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