

# “We were learning by doing”

## An Interview with Charles Esche

Reviewing the last years Charles Esche touches on aspects of curatorial networking, the pursuit of redefining the institution and its inevitable necessity to affront people, as well as his notion of *Experimental Institutionalism*, which echoes in his current directorship at Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.

**Lucie Kolb & Gabriel Flückiger:** We thought a possible starting point would be the situation you found yourself in when you started at Rooseum and the formats you developed.

**Charles Esche:** When I started, that was in 2000, the concept of an institutional solidarity and that we're trying to change institutions together was not really so apparent to me. There were certain individuals that were interested in similar questions, but in most cases they weren't really in charge of an institution. Biennales and larger temporary events were the things a few friends and I had access to, rather than institutions. We were concerned with a wider—what I would call then but not now—leftist, understanding of what institutions could do in terms of emancipation, in terms of community engagement, in terms of art as a potential way in which the reimagining of the world could take place. I saw the institution as a tool to investigate this question. Can art be a useful democratic device? A device to install other forms of democracy than the ones we had? From the beginning, the entrails of social democracy in a country like Sweden were immediately fascinating.

**LK & GF:** Would you say that this vision was already established when you were at Tramway, a Scottish art space—or asked differently: was it connected to certain places?

**CE:** When I started at Tramway in 1993, it felt like Scotland had been largely removed from the cultural-political economic map, more or less from the Second World War onwards. It was marginal and most of the ambitious artists left for London. Yet, a new generation was more conscious of wanting to make Glasgow an active place. So the main topic was how to get noticed and how to constitute an experimental Scottish art community, which wasn't simply a regional outpost of an English cultural discourse. I

came from England but quickly felt at home, maybe because of my German family and working-class origins. In the mid-1990s, I felt part of a team that was working to build a situation where art could flourish. I worked with great pleasure with my own generation, but I have to say that the political interventions by artists whom I invited, such as Allan Sekula or Stephan Willats, were less understood and not that well received. It's a complicated path, but this was a sign to me that I needed to formulate my relation between art and politics in a different way.

**LK & GF:** Would you say that the exhibitions at Tramway had the form of rather conventional exhibitions and then at Rooseum you also started to focus on other formats?

**CE:** For sure. I wasn't the boss at Tramway. I had the charge only of the exhibition program. I would have done things in Tramway differently, if I had been able to structure it fully, though I am proud of a project like *Trust* that engaged artists as curators in a team. The questions that came to me once I took up the director position at Rooseum were new, however. They involved structuring a whole institution, marking it out from others and also doing what I really believed in. I didn't want to answer the usual expectations in a traditional way, where you basically wheel in the material from outside, put it into the room in a nice way and open the door. I wanted it to be a place of what we then called knowledge production.

**LK & GF:** What does this mean?

**CE:** We developed different platforms; we worked with Critical Studies and the local academy, we had a thing called Open Forum that tried to create links with certain communities and activists, we developed a *Future Archive* of musical, filmic and literary influences on artists and we had residencies

and studios. I think people who came to Rooseum got very involved. At the same time, we alienated other people who liked the old 'modernist' Rooseum. At the time it hurt, but nowadays, I'd say you have to have people that are really pissed off with you and say that you destroy the organization in order to know you are achieving something. If you don't have that, you're probably not really doing your job as director. Your job requires you to bring in new impulses and a new direction to a situation while there are many people for whom this is simply not necessary.

**LK & GF:** What about the institution's relation to the public, did you attract a group of visitors or even a new public that didn't exist before?

**CE:** There is this quote from Vito Acconci that I very often used, which is that "a gallery could be place where a community can be called to order, called to a particular purpose." That still appeals to me. I like the idea that you do indeed create a public through your activities and I have seen that emerge in Malmö. I recently talked to a few old colleagues and I have to say that people from that time in Rooseum seem to look back with great fondness on the projects we did. Also, I don't think you would be here today if it hadn't had an effect. Yet that public we created was not the one with sufficient influence to shape the city council's opinions. It was a younger public, not politically active for all the right reasons of cynicism about 21<sup>st</sup> century politics. Yet, as all social democratic art institutions, we were dependent on political patronage for survival—and in this case local political favors. It is a complicated story because Rooseum was founded by a neo-liberal collector, but then became dependent on the social democrats, who in many ways hated its origins. This was all before my time but it was a legacy I had to deal with. What I asked for, very naively, was far-sighted politicians with an interest in art as a way to think about and act out social change. Unfortunately they didn't exist in Malmö (or many other places). Also, the art community can be very isolated or internally focused. In Malmö, for instance, there was no relationship between the small activist community and the art community at that time, so we didn't have good routes into local political networks. I think this was failure of our approach and something I tried to address differently in Eindhoven. The other important issue, looking back, is that it seems an urgent public probably only forms in a moment of tension, like it was formed in Istanbul during the demonstrations this summer (2013).

But often this public is a very incoherent group of people and the question is how to sustain it. A public also formed around the Van Abbemuseum last year, when we faced the opposition (again) of the social democrats; they wanted to reduce our funding very severely in order to control and popularize the program. This time we could mobilize and successfully resist, because it directly concerned the museum. At the Rooseum, in the early 2000s, the tensions of today still seemed far away. The city was hardcore social democrat, the economy was growing, optimism about the new bridge to Denmark made everyone quite content. The major issue that was brewing was identity of course. We did a project called *In 2052, Malmö will no longer be Swedish* which consisted of residencies and productions. It included Esra Ersen, Yael Bartana, Can Altay—a group of artists who could reflect on this from different perspectives. But it was not really picked up in the media or in politics at the time, again because things were still just too sweet to bother or because an art institution was confined to the cultural and entertainment pages. Again, I think the lessons of this went into the project in Eindhoven.

**LK & GF:** Could you name certain projects or exhibitions at Rooseum that were successful?

**CE:** Fundamentally, I think those years were about trying to shift the map of the place of art within the social framework. There wasn't a real space for social critique in northwestern European society; social democracy is a sort of totalizing system in an odd way, in that it embraces critique to nullify it. We wanted to change that, given the apolitical condition post-1989. I think we succeeded to the extent that 'institutionalism' and what to do with art institutions became a topic in general cultural discourse. It was no longer 'do your job well' but more 'what kind of job do you do?' I think our publication *Rooseum Provisorium* is a rich source for these debates. The other map that I think we were trying to shift was the geographic, which in early 2000 was still a cold war map in which the socialist states were not really recognized. There was still a reluctance to recognize that a Polish or Latvian artist is as competent as an American or a German artist in a place like Sweden. So we needed to recognize our immediate Baltic region for instance, or art's new capacity to intervene in the social after the end of liberal autonomy as a progressive discourse. Those changes seemed to be important, shifting the place of art within the map of social democracy and shifting the map of art itself within art historical narratives.

Thinking about the most successful projects, I'd list a few solo shows like Superflex and Nedko Solakov, group shows like *Baltic Babel*, or *We—Intentional Communities*, and also the Critical Studies course. There were also some great residencies by artists like Luca Frei, Serkan Özkaya or Lynn Löwenstein.

**LK & GF:** How was the relationship to the board and the financial backer?

**CE:** None of it really worked. We had a board that didn't really function. There was a board of two people, nobody else wanted to be on the board. When I took on Rooseum it was more or less bankrupt. We had one moderately rich collector who was on the board, Lars Tullin, and he was the main person who supported us with bank loans. We also got money from the city and some foundations in Sweden but it was not much. To the extent that we were smart enough and aware enough we would identify certain funds that had an agenda and then try to join our agenda to theirs. There was a Stockholm-based Future Fund for instance that funded us three times and then said they couldn't do it regularly. But we weren't great at fundraising, to be honest, so sometimes I couldn't pay my salary for a month. In that sense, it was a constant struggle. But somehow you put things together and you survive. I don't think money is the main issue, when you have a sense that you are trying to achieve something, you find the means to do it. It was experimentalism that we were interested in and that drove us. We couldn't sell experimentalism to a company and we couldn't really sell it to a newspaper. Perhaps because we weren't good at sales—I think it's my great weakness as a director—but also because they're interested in short-term results above processes. Nowadays we know that the neoliberal model ignores 70% of human needs—yet even so it is still dominant. I think in those days that idea of failure wasn't something people understood yet. There were no challenges to neoliberalism then, only moderators.

**LK & GF:** Did you follow the institutional work of other people, e.g. Ute Meta Bauer or Roger Buergel?

**CE:** We were a bit young and naive and weren't that connected. The artists locally were very important to me. People like Superflex, Jens Haaning, Luca Frei, Alexander Gutke, Anna Ling, Kajsa Dahlberg as well as curators like Simon Sheikh or Gertrud Sandqvist. Catherine David, after she did *Documenta*, I had huge respect for. Maria Lind for sure,

and Vasif Kortun, of course. More than any other individual. Adam Szymczyk and Foksal Gallery in Warsaw, an independent space at that time, were a crucial link for me, as were the beginnings of whw in Zagreb. I was looking East mostly, while keeping Scotland in mind. It was also more about peripheral places. The centers—London, Paris, even Berlin—just didn't feel right. They were already too occupied with the market, and Rooseum or Malmö were an irrelevant inconvenience to them. Or that's how it felt. I guess you link with people who are hospitable in the end. Also, I like the provinces, you are less under the microscope and can develop things. I think the impact of Rooseum was less immediate but more lasting because of that.

**LK & GF:** Did you follow a certain vision with your institutional practice?

**CE:** What's important with that sense of New Institutionalism, or *Experimental Institutionalism* as I would prefer to call it, is that education or relationships with small, just forming communities were very important for us. I think all of the places that fall under that umbrella were interested in small and deep, not wide and shallow, in terms of audience engagement. We needed to work with the public, to turn them from audience to collaborators, to switch the idea from passive reception to people becoming active shapers of that institutional message. That meant that you reduce in a sense the scope of who you really want to talk to, and the danger was that you start to talk to the people who share an interest with you and close off to the rest. We could move more quickly than if we had to carry the mass of the public with us, who did not quite understand what we do—and we weren't very good at or interested in explaining it to them, because we were busy with the experiment.

**LK & GF:** What was the size of Rooseum's audience?

**CE:** Maybe 30.000, depending on the years, but probably between 25.000 and 33.000. But we did get committed people, and there were art press articles, I would be interviewed by *Artforum*, *Frieze* etc. There was a certain awareness of what we were doing. What I was learning to do was how to talk about it in an academic way, rather than popularizing it. When I came to Eindhoven, I was determined to learn from that and do things differently in terms of a broader public.

**LK & GF:** Concerning the discourse and people writing about New Institutionalism, the historical context or the historicizing isn't really present. There are some examples, but they're not making a genealogy or the like.

**CE:** That's why New Institutionalism bothers me, because I think we were in an experimental phase and I don't think we were conscious or striving to be 'new.' We were learning by doing, it was really pragmatic in that sense. Let's find out how things work, but on our terms. I don't feel happy about the word 'new' because it is such a neoliberal term. It sounds like "new, improved washing powder" or whatever product to me, and that's not what it was really about. It was not a marketing tool and I think this is why it failed within the contemporary framework of economic attention in a sense, although it did clearly establish a certain identity. Nevertheless I want to put the emphasis on an Experimental Institutionalism, because I think this releases you from the idea of creating a grand narrative of 'newness' which implies that now all institutions should become like this—it was not the case that there was an old institutionalism, but now there's a new one that will replace it. Rather we said times have changed since the modern age and the institutions don't know how to behave, so let's push them and see what happens.

**LK & GF:** Did the discourse around institutional practice have a legitimating or catalytic function?

**CE:** Definitely, if you speak about things they become real. It was about what the institution could be—again, the experimental nature of it meant that the statements you were making were also speculative or aspirational. This is where we wanted to place ourselves, working with a form (the institution) in a place (Malmö, München, Rotterdam or wherever) and asking what it meant in 2000 to be doing this. We wanted the institution to become an active place and it felt like we could learn from other institutions while maintaining the traditional right to free space and experimentation that we inherited from the avant-garde and the Cold War. We looked at the community center, the library, the laboratory, even the church, as models to eat up and reuse. These institutions were part of that comfortable northern European ecology that needed reformulating, abandoning, reshaping. So that's why I said at the beginning that we could be part community center, part laboratory, part school and not so much the show-room function that traditionally belonged to the art

space. To create waves and movement—that was experimental institutionalism for me, to move in existing society. So it also felt like the school, the laboratories and the community center would have to make room for us—and that was definitely an aspirational statement.

**LK & GF:** How did you perceive the 2003 publication *New Institutionalism* by Jonas Ekeberg that coined the term?

**CE:** I know Jonas and I like him a lot. But as I told him, I don't like the 'new' bit, though I liked the -ism. I wanted my work not to be judged as a proposal for what could happen generally, but as experiments that produced an analysis. If we look now, we see that the things we called New Institutions didn't actually produce anything stable and lasting as 'new institutions.' But they did produce experimental results, which certainly informed what I've been doing here at Van Abbemuseum and I think informs what other people like Maria Lind or Vasif Kortun, for instance, have been able to do elsewhere. But it wasn't that it became the new model. Which is again why I think that the name is wrong.

**LK & GF:** How were you connected with other curators at that time?

**CE:** We had a small informal group with Barbara Steiner and Bart de Baere called 'Leipziger Gruppe.' I also tried to form a closer alliance with Catherine David at Witte de With. But she left, then I left, and the work took more shape in Eindhoven. We weren't claiming those strategies as collective or combined, but there were joint learning experiences. There were two NIFCA conferences—*Stopping the Process* and *Changing the System*—that were important to connect us, but I think we were all just responding to what we saw. The question I asked in that last exhibition at Rooseum, *What happened to Social Democracy?*, was something that we shared; it meant that we wanted to build different kinds of institutions that could address the world as we saw it and not the world as the social democratic authorities saw it. But I think people like Jonas and Alex Farquharson actually made us more conscious that we were doing similar things and I am for a comparison of these institutional experiments, as I think they each result in different outcomes. It is absolutely necessary now to write a historiography of that time and to understand what happened in order to build on it and experiment anew. It's vital to analyze its strengths and weaknesses. When it's not writ-

ten down it's lost. Perhaps we need to be historicized by another generation, by you who weren't involved and who need to come along and validate (or not) through your own experiences.

**LK & GF:** If you reflect on your momentary position, can you still apply the term experimental to it?

**CE:** Van Abbemuseum is a bigger platform. But fundamentally, it's the same question: What can you do with the museum in the 21st Century? Can it be the source of social and political questions, which visitors can investigate through the exhibition, rather than a treasure chest where you just show some beautiful jewels? This still seems experimental to me, in the sense that we don't know how to answer that research question. I think as long as you maintain that methodology you're still experimenting. The moment you know the answer, you become an institution reproducing its own power. I feel that the experiment is still urgently needed. As I said, we know now that neoliberalism doesn't work for the 99%, which we didn't know in those Rooseum days. We know that the system of capital reproduction serves only a very small number of people at the top and that trickle-down is actually trickle-up away from the poor. We know that the systems that have been put in place as globalization allow economies to grow, while demolishing social cohesion. We're much more critical of the current situation than we were back in 2000. But we still don't have any answers or any bigger political projects. In that sense we're still in the experiment.

**Charles Esche** is a curator and writer. Director of the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven and has been appointed as curator for the Sao Paolo Biennial 2014. Co-founder and co-editor of *Afterall Journal and Books* and the *Exhibition Histories* series. Between 2000-2004 director of Rooseum Center for Contemporary Art in Malmö.