

# Writing New Institutionalism

## An E-Mail Exchange between Lucie Kolb & Gabriel Flückiger

This email exchange between this issue's editors aims at reflecting and unfolding different states of the research process on New Institutionalism, the methodological challenges confronted and their inscribing effects as discursive agents.

**Lucie Kolb:** When we began our research on New Institutionalism over six months ago, we perceived it as a curatorial discourse, only to realize later on that it actually consists of individual actors and their practices, to which the concept of New Institutionalism was applied as a framework.

**Gabriel Flückiger:** Even our first draft, based on our reading of the published literature, simply presupposed the concept as given. Only in the course of the interviews did it become clear to us that almost all participants, even Jonas Ekeberg who launched the term in the first place, now distanced themselves from it to the point of critiquing it. This was not apparent in any of the published texts; the only irregularity we noticed was that the discourse suddenly breaks off around 2007. The concept ghosts through the literature without being secure in its substance.

**LK:** I also noticed that many of the texts are predominantly affirmative; the authors cite each other extensively and quite uncritically. Perhaps we can interpret this as a result of the fact that the writers, despite their relatively successful careers, are largely on short-term employment contracts. Is the possibility of critical distancing perhaps linked to permanent employment? Stephan Geene writes somewhere that "self-criticism is hard to come by in the shallow waters of the precariat." I'm interested in that. The model of the temporary contract is not completely unattractive, since it enables agency for individual actors within different institutions, but the consequences of the associated economic insecurity are devastating. Every form of academic or scientific exchange becomes a job interview. In this sense the working conditions of the subjects we interviewed

resemble our own: we act in the spaces between self-actualization and institutional constraint.

**GF:** Many of these actors in the cultural field are writers, but would resist labeling their activity as New Institutionalism. I can understand this skepticism, since this type of branding influences and perhaps anticipates later receptions, while aspects that the writer might find important are neglected. I find Jonas Ekeberg's suggestion that we operate with a plurality of concepts worth thinking about. However it is not an easy approach to implement.

**LK:** That's the question we want to describe, isn't it? New Institutionalism worked perfectly as cultural branding; it made a whole range of soft-core approaches to institutional critique visible and thus negotiable to us. Since we also work with a range of other concepts of practice, there are more disparate practices open to discussion. In so far as their respective references and relations to each other change in response, their significance is also continuously reconstituted. Perhaps such a plurality of concepts corresponds well to this constant repositioning and re-forging of relationships among various practices.

**GF:** Concerning visibility though, we have to be clear that we write about institutional practices, but we have not *seen* any of the exhibitions or practices we discuss. We are looking back on events that took place in the past and are therefore limited in our selection of examples to those either discussed in the literature or accessible via archives. Larger institutions—such as the Rooseum—also published books on their own history, which lead to their more prominent reception. This is how certain exhibitions are inscribed in a canon, and not others. The fact that we have access only via documentation reinforces the

word of the curator, who is often the main source of information. The voices of other participants and contributors (artists, technicians, visitors) are much less present if not entirely absent. Curatorial intention and interpretation thus begin to intermingle, which is problematic.

**LK:** We are picking up the thread of voices that speak out in a linguistically organized discourse or are mentioned within it. We hardly find progressive institutional practices that were not identified as such by the actors involved, particularly by curators. I ask myself, how could we have proceeded to find other threads? Another insight gained in the research is certainly that New Institutionalism included a rhetoric of reform, which didn't necessarily materialize as concrete results.

**GF:** The linguistic statements are strongly infused with a terminology of intended change, but on the concrete, actual achievements of change they are silent. As evident as the concept is, the specificity of its object remains obscure.

**LK:** It would be an exaggeration to claim that we developed entirely new conceptual instruments to be able to think about institutional activity "as reification of political disposition." And yet our text, as well as the others assembled here, is based on an awareness of the importance of including differential speaking positions as well as paying attention to the heterogeneity of narratives, differing depictions and their implications. A narrative of New Institutionalism that attempts to level ambivalences would never do it justice.