

Paul O'Neill

interviewed by Lindsey Sharman

Lindsey Sharman: We would like to talk about *New Institutionalism*, a term borrowed from economics and sociology, that became popular during the last decade to classify a certain type of curatorial practice, institutional reform and critical debate concerned with challenging the art institutions. It was a response to artistic practices that have questioned the institutional, programming and staffing structures; its distribution mechanism and marketing strategies and even the need of the institutions existence to be a mediator for the visual arts. With that in mind, what kind of curatorial projects' have you seen lately, that you consider interesting examples of this idea of *New Institutionalism*?

Paul O'Neill: Well, the problem with the *New Institutionalism* as a paradigm, if you are setting up that there is a paradigm shift in the last, say, 10, 15 years, with people like Maria Lind, Charles Esche, Katrin David, in relatively small institutions, is that they all have left. So as a paradigm it only existed for a very, very short period of time in relation to the specific individual curators who were responsible for coming up with that term, but also rethinking what the institution could look like. So, for Charles Esche, in Rooseum in Malmo, thinking about the institution as a laboratory, as much as an educational institution, as much as an exhibiting space. Maria Lind - at the Kunstverein in Munich - was thinking about the kind of everyday nature of the institution, so it became continually activated with the presence of different and divergent publics, and making the archive more overtly public, in the entrance of the museum for example. And then, someone like Katrin David, that only lasted a year in Witte de With, where she was curating primarily a contemporary Arab artists' program.

I think the notion of the institutional critique, from the position of the curator, is a by product of that internalization of the modus operandi of the institutional critique; self-reflectivity, self-critique, and becoming part of the way in which the institution in itself promotes itself externally. And I see that drive towards *New Institutionalism*, from the curatorial perspective, as being because of that, or contin-

gent on it certainly. In terms of thinking about recent curatorial projects that might be rethinking what that could be, I would say a number of artists' projects such as Jeanne van Heeswijk's, the *Blue House* in Ijburg¹, which is a kind of a micro-institution where by she took over a villa in Ijburg, as part of a city extension of Amsterdam, and turned it into what she called *The Housing Association of the Mind*. And *The Housing Association of the Mind* was made up of a number of members of which I think they are maybe 60, or plus, who ultimately contributed to what the *Blue House* could become, but without any expectations as to what that would be. So the idea of, "Let's spend four years together and see what happens", is an interesting institutional model, also as an interesting counter institutional model. Within the context of perhaps the most restrictive conditions under which an artist is invited to work; a regeneration project, in which new communities are arriving to live in new parts of Amsterdam. As part of that, an institution is set up, which ultimately exists along side the development of that new community as they arrive is a really interesting kind a shift of thinking. There is a kind of parallel development between *Blue House*, and also a parallel development with Ijburg as a community, which ends of forming itself over a four-year period. Artists, critics, sociologists, anthropologists, filmmakers, documentary and political theorists contribute to what that might become. All of the people who moved through it, or come through it, or realize projects under its rubric, ultimately disperse and translate those activities beyond the location of Ijburg and also beyond the temporality of the four years. So, I think as a counter institutional model, it is really perhaps one of the most interesting New Institutional, or thinking/rethinking what a New Institution could look like.

New Institutionalism is a very short-lived moment, but also its short lived nature does have a correspondence with historical precedents even very recent historical precedents, which is the practice of Ute Meta Bauer and Nikolaus Schaffhausen. Perhaps this is why it is disintegrated as a subject area, or why it's become less interesting to many writers, and critics, and curators; because it was built around a

number of individuals and those individuals moved on to larger institutions. Even art fairs are institutions which have become very smart, so therefore in order to encapsulate some of the self-reflexivity, art fairs commission new projects, hold talks, commission critical publications, do something site responsive or location responsive. I think that permeates all larger institutions now as well.



LS: Where do you see this failing or succeeding?

PO: They have succeeded I would say in generating many publications, generating a certain critical discourse around what constitutes the institution; what are its parameters, boundaries and power structures? In terms of its affects in terms of transformative change, I would say is particularly limited. Maybe that's also in a sense a bi-product of the 1990's as well, because many curators who are currently working in large institutions now, emerged during that moment in the 90s. Since their emergence, the independent, critical thinking, creative curators have also moved into larger institutions. There are more restrictive conditions under which you would work in the Van Abbemuseum, you are working with a collection, you have to rethink the collection, it is a very particular type of public, it is also an historical institution, and its very much about cultural heritage. It's a Dutch institution, which ultimately comes with that historical paradigm of thinking about the legacies, thinking about nationalism, thinking about cultural identity. But in many ways the advocates of *New Institutionalism* ultimately moved away from those institutions where it was possible to have some sort of transformative change, into larger institutions where they could have less of an impact.

LS: What are your thoughts on artists run centers that have eventually become institutions themselves? As we have now been talking about how

these curators have now moved into large institutions. How do you react to this flow toward the institution or toward bureaucracies?

PO: I think any self-organization is also a self-institution, so I think that the possibility of being outside. Somehow you know the Dadaists really didn't exist outside, they thought they were existing outside and that they ultimately could break down the walls of the institution, the museum without walls for example. But they never really existed outside, because, in order to exist and to acquire, gather and facilitate political agency, they have to rely on certain figures within the art world that would be managed within the more dominant cultural institution of the time – critics and writers. Anyway that doesn't really answer your question, and to go back to what I was saying any self organization is in itself, a self institution but it is about how it institutes itself, and how it constitutes itself at a particular moment without becoming completely bogged down in the administrative mechanisms that enable it to sustain itself and continue etc.

There was a moment, again fairly recently I'd say within the last 10 years, where the notion of the self organization as a kind of counter organization, or a counter institution, was quite popular, and you know even looking at many publications such as the SUPERFLEX publication on self organization² or Maria Lind's book *Taking the Matter Into Common Hands*³. There is a certain ubiquity of certain collectives that are represented by a particular discursive shift, such as Raqs Media Collective or 16 Beaver (Studio) in New York or the Copenhagen Free University. Some self organizations I believe employ the idea of self organization as an alternative conduit to a particular art market, and you could call it the "curatorial art market" for example, or the "biennial art market", or the "discursive art market." Meaning that they are facilitated and accommodated within an art discourse, if not within art markets, where exchange value is based on capital or how a piece of art may be sold. That is one of the most paradigmatic shifts for me in the 1990; is that to acquire value within the art world, is not necessarily to acquire monetary value, but to acquire cultural representation, representational economies. I think that self organizations were certainly apart of that. I mean how many cultural discourses were created in the 1990's? It was endless, and this is certainly along side the proliferation of biennials, and the proliferation of smaller biennials, the proliferation of smaller institutions, the emergence of larger institutions; I mean *Tate Modern* only

opened in 2000 which is only 10 years ago, yet it seems like its been there forever. Other institutions, which have had difficulty in accommodating that shift, that discursive shift, the shift from practice to discourse. Many institutions have been left behind, such as MOMA, the Guggenheim; they look lazy, boring, kind of like dead institutions.

LS: In reference to your exhibition, *Coalesce* (2005), London. How did the decision of creating 3 years: foreground, underground and background have an impact on or changed the demographics of the public who visited the exhibition? Did this make it more accessible?



PO: I think that they are all very different projects, they all came with their own concrete publics and their own abstract publics. There were certain people who attended the gallery program at *Redux*, (London) or attended the gallery program at *Smart Project Space* (in Amsterdam), or the gallery program at Sligo (*The Model Project Space* in Sligo, Ireland) so that's kind of a concrete public. Then there is an abstract public, which is the idea of publicity that you're trying to produce, enable or sustain, within the exhibition form; and maybe speculating on what that could look like. So for me there are these two tracks, there would be a fast track and slow track, it's important to think about, "is it possible to have a populist exhibition?" But a populist exhibition that's not actually curtailed by its own popularity. For example, *Coalesce* at *Smart* was a really popular show, it was full of kids all the time, and had all that kind of vibrancy to it. But, at the same time there were very serious moments within it, in terms of discussions we had, performances that we had, and also some work was very serious. It plays off that, because of its dichotomies, in a sense. I would be very resistant to the desire to really think through the generation of new audiences, and to evaluate who they might be. I've been very resistant to the "social

engineering drive" within the cultural sector, particularly within the private and public section in the UK.

Captions

1 Paul O'Neill lecturing for the Postgraduate Program in Curating, Institute Cultural Studies in the Arts, Zurich Hochschule der Kunste at White Space: Office for Curating, Zurich, Switzerland, November 5, 2010.

2 Paul O'Neil describing *Coalesce* to students of the Postgraduate Program in Curating during his November 2010 talk at White Space: Office for Curating

Notes

1 *The Blue House*: A project by Jeanne van Heeswijk [et] Hervé Paraponaris. <http://www.blauwehuis.org/blauwehuisv2/>

2 Bradley, W. Hannula, M. Superflex. *Self-Organization: Counter-Economic Strategies*. Sternberg Press. 2006.

3 ed. Billing, J. Lind, M. Nilsson, L. *Taking the Matter into Common Hands: On Contemporary Art and Collaborative Practices*. Black Dog Publishing. 2007.

Paul O'Neill is an artist, curator, educator and writer based in Bristol and New York. He is the new Director of the Graduate Program at Bard Centre for Curatorial Studies, New York. Paul has co-curated more than fifty exhibition projects across the world including: *The Curatorial Timeshare, Enclave, London* (since 2012); *Last Day, Cartel Gallery, London* (2012); *Our Day Will Come, Part of Iteration: Again, Hobart, Tasmania* (2011); *We are Grammar, Pratt Institute, Manhattan Gallery, New York* (2011); *Coalesce: happenstance, SMART, Amsterdam* (2009); *Making Do, The Lab, Dublin* (2007); *General Idea: Selected Retrospective, Project, Dublin* (2006); *Tonight, Studio Voltaire, London*, (2004); *Are We There Yet? Glassbox, Paris* (2000) and *Passports, Zacheta Gallery of Contemporary Art, Warsaw* (1998). He has held lecturing positions on the MFA Curating, Goldsmiths College, London and Visual Culture at Middlesex University amongst others. He currently international research fellow with the Graduate School of Creative Arts and Media, Dublin, and international tutor on the de Appel Curatorial Programme. His practice is interested in addressing the systems of interpretation that are involved in making sense of the world around us and the compulsions that lead to interpretation and meaning itself. His work explores the experience, of traversing territory, of moving across things rather than patrolling

boundaries. This exploration may take a number of media, approaches and forms, from curatorial projects and art-making, to discursive events, writing or lecture presentations. Paul explores notions of exhibition-making as a form of collaborative artistic practice with multiple actors and agencies at work together.

Marina Lopes Coelho was born in São Paulo. She lives, studies and works in Zurich. Trained as a graphic designer at the Faculdade de Belas Artes de São Paulo, she has worked several years in design studios and publishers. Focusing later in photography, Marina has developed her career showing her work in some exhibitions in Brazil and has published the book *Atrevida* with DBA-Dorea Books and Art. Her interest in art goes beyond her photographic production, having staged in Venice Peggy Guggenheim Collection and worked as a producer of exhibitions at Galeria Leme, in São Paulo. She has graduated with a Master of Advanced Studies in Curating. Currently she is director of the Kunsthalle Sao Paolo.

Lindsey V. Sharman was born in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan (CA). Sharman has studied art history and curating in Canada, England, Austria and Switzerland (ZHdK, www.curating.org). Most recently, Sharman was appointed to a research position with the University of Calgary as curator of art for The Founders Gallery at The Military Museums where she explores contemporary issues surrounding art and conflict.

Corinne Isabelle Rinaldis grew up in Italy and the Italian part of Switzerland. She has studied sculpture, acting and interior design and is now living in Zürich, she graduated in Master of Advanced Studies in Curating, Postgraduate Programme in Curating, ZHdK and is currently working at Hauser & Wirth, Zürich.