

(New) Institution(alism)

Editorial by Lucie Kolb

✉ Gabriel Flückiger

The present issue of *On Curating* contributes to a critical re-engagement with New Institutionalism. This conceptual framework is used to encompass a series of curatorial, artistic and educational practices that, in various places around the turn of the Millennium, developed concrete ideas to change art institutions, their mandates and formats: art institutions were to function as sites of research and socially engaged spaces of debate. The fact that discussions about the function of and demands for change within art institutions have become increasingly topical in the context of the controversial and much criticized revised Swiss cultural policy for 2012-2016, and the European-wide tendency toward budget cuts, emphasizes the importance of a critical reevaluation of these artistic and curatorial practices. Although a majority of the experimentally active art institutions that were gathered under the term New Institutionalism have now been closed down or changed their orientation, thus implying that the phenomenon was bound up with a particular historical situation, its conditions, structures and implications clearly still resonate in the contemporary organization of art. For these reasons, the present issue intends to enable differentiated approaches to the phenomenon of New Institutionalism in its various forms, by including a multiplicity of voices and analytical approaches.

An introductory text by Lucie Kolb and Gabriel Flückiger considers New Institutionalism as a phenomenon of discourse, which is historically situated and evaluated as such. The text is accompanied by a self-reflexive email exchange between the authors. This is followed by a series of interviews, where involved actors such as Maria Lind, Charles Esche and Jonas Ekeberg discuss the forms and dimensions of critical institutional practice around New Institutionalism. They touch on aspects of curatorial networking as well as the problems with the concept and its effect on their various current working practices. Rachel Mader's contribution introduces two contrasting analytic positions—the institution as an actualization of dominant ideologies on the one hand, and as dynamically constituted balancing act on the other—to discuss fields of movement and agency with/in institutions. Felix Vogel reviews the problem of an explicitly curatorial historiography of the exhibition, with particular attention to the specific qualities of the speaker position of the curator and the resulting structures of discourse. Further contributions by Alex Farquharson as well as Vanessa Müller and Astrid Wege (European Kunsthalle) report on their own curatorial and institutional practices. Farquharson's text is a reflection on how experimental practices can influence the activities of a larger-scale institution, while the text by Joan Müller and Wege outlines the challenges and opportunities of institutional agency without a permanent space. A concluding conversation with Liesbeth Bik (Bik Van der Pol) deals with the potential agency of artists in art institutions and suggests strategies to activate the viewer.

With these contributions we would like to situate the critical and change-oriented efforts of New Institutionalism in a context that allows us to understand ways of thinking and speaking about the institutional organization of art as part of a fundamental discussion on the potential of contemporary art institutions.

These reflections are a first concrete output resulting from the thematic focus 'institutional studies' that has been built up and developed at the Competence Center Art and Public Spheres at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts, School of Art and Design, since 2012. Through different annual topics (2013: New Institutionalism; 2014: discursive institutions) and research projects (e.g. on self-organization in art under postfordist conditions) the structural, discursive and ideological context of art production and reception is analyzed and critically reflected.