Playing the Wild Child
Art Institutions in a Situation of Changed Public Interest

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German curator and art theoretician Nina Möntmann believes that small art institutions, because of their subversive potential, offer possibilities to escape the pressure of having to attract a mass public. By experimenting with interaction between diverse interest groups and by creating international platforms, they can break away from dominant corporate strategies and redefine their public significance.

Currently, art institutions are concerned in many ways about their publics. On the economic plane there is pressure to attract a mass public and to deliver a visitors' count to both sponsors and politicians. This concept of the public as an anonymous mass of consumers is contradicted by the need to produce new publics and to cater to these newly emerging groups with the institution's programme, a need shared by many curators and directors. Institutions, as well as artists and the arrests, still relate to an old concept of public domains which follows an ideal of coming together and communicating. Even when conflicts are tolerated or are regarded both as the essence and the consequence of the democratic ethos, fundamental changes in the public realm in the age of neocapitalism put this value of communication into question.

Institutions, and therefore of course also art institutions, are by definition instruments or platforms for a prevailing order of social values. The language philosopher John Searle prefaces his ontological investigation of institutions by the following basic assumption: 'An institution is any collectively accepted system of rules (procedures, practices) that enables us to create institutional facts. [1] The concepts of the collective and the system of rules provide the basic parameters for an institution. From this it can be concluded that, conversely, society, when it acts through its institutions, follows a logical structure. Ideally, society and institutions therefore give each other a kind of structural grip and thus open up for each other a mutual potential for action which, however, is accompanied by the side effects of bureaucracy, hierarchical paternalism, exclusion and generalization. So much for the official part of this pragmatic relationship. What is the case, however, when the 'institution', in this case its staff, make their own agenda that deviates from the governmental line?

Elsewhere I have already drawn attention to the fact that art institutions, as distinct from other institutions such as state authorities, parties and trade unions, are not given any direct participation in political processes. [2] Instead, they are given the (indirect) commission to produce images of realities which make them easier to consume, or to design parallel universes in which people can lose themselves for a time and in which everything is more beautiful and better – a parallel universe which either appears as spiritually separated or is supposed to entertain visitors. The fulfilment of this (tacit) commission is generally accompanied by the reward of simplified fund raising. Art

institutions, however, in contrast to other institutions, have an individual, changeable profile which gives their actors a relatively large amout of room to manoeuvre in. Thus, for instance, the director of an art institution, while keeping to certain boundary conditions, can adopt a new programmatic direction, in this way addressing or producing new publics. Because of the difficulty of controlling them, in this process, art institutions also have a certain subversive social potential not enjoyed by other institutions which, indeed, exist in order to regulate and legitimate a certain hegemonic social form. The question is, however, which art institutions take advantage of this potential, and with what results? It is a question of temptation: what is more enticing; broad social recognition including reviews in the arts editorials of large newspapers, accompanied by a secure budget, or the pioneering achievements of proposing experimental social change and producing alternative publics? Those refractory 'wild children' among the institutions thus develop an institutional avant-garde whose potential resides in maintaining a closer proximity to artistic practice and operating more closely with social problematics, instead of being merely the executive organ of direct governmental instructions and regulations. One must be satisfied with this opposition; it would be naive to believe that there could be a critical institution at the centre of attention with a reliable economic basis. This is inconceivable, and perhaps even a necessary antithesis in the age of global capitalism.

Now, there is a multitude of different art institutions, and it can be noted that the more 'official' an institution is, the more public it has in the sense of broad and diverse attention, and conversely, the further it is removed from an official institutional status, the more independent it is, and the smaller are the public groups which feel themselves addressed by them and as belonging to them.

Institutions and the Public Sphere

An art institution constitutes itself to a certain degree from its position in the public sphere, especially in its relationships with those public groups which visit the public art gallery or museum, talk about it, criticize it, take part in events and discussions, support the institution and its activities on various levels, associate their names with the institution's programme, feel themselves part of a social group associated with the museum, or contribute and participate in other, informal ways.

Their participants assume an important standpoint in the critical stock-taking of institutions, and Searle emphasizes this by drawing attention to the fact that this view can only be performed from the inside. [3] It is, in a certain sense, a mapping of the institution which serves as the first step in a critical practice. Hence projects of 'institutional critique' always arise from a parasitic perspective through the artist transgressing his or her usual, largely transparent position as a producer for the (semi-)public sphere of the exhibition space, risking a step behind the scenes and becoming a direct participant in the institution. Apart from the staff of an institution, and its guests and co-producers, the participation of certain public groups in institutional processes is extraordinarily important and, accordingly, the interest in the composition of these groups is fundamental. Hence, today, it is one of the most urgent tasks of contemporary art institutions to generate a peer group which keeps the hardware running and uses the software.

At present, however, many curators and directors regard these vital relationships between the institution and its publics as fragile and awkward. In the economic area they experience the pressure of attracting as many people as possible with a populist programme to serve the profile of requirements demanded by sponsors and politicians. Consequently, the representatives of art institutions are worried in many ways about their publics.

How does this essential relationship between art institution and its publics shape up under the changed conditions of increasing privatization of both the institutions and the public realm? Today, the plans of art institutions are determined, or at least influenced, by

the dependency on external and increasingly private resources. This implies the commission of attracting a mass public and delivering visitor numbers. If we compare the influence of ratings on television programmes, the fatal effects of this principle become all too apparent. Because institutions, as described above, have a close relationship with the general value system of a society, it can be said that the 'corporate turn' in the institutional landscape mirrors the general power relations in a late-capitalist, neoliberal social constitution. Today, art institutions are becoming branded spaces, and the private financiers are, as a rule, not so much interested in visiting and taking part in the programme of the museum, which they possibly support, but in deploying it as an instrument for the production of corporate image and ultimately corporate profit. Their ideal public is the anonymous mass of global consumers. This corporate model of an art institution – among which we can count as the most public the huge museums such as the Guggenheim and the Tate, which are spreading according to the principle of franchising, and even the MoMA, but also increasingly medium-sized public art galleries, and even smaller institutions – has a peer group of speculators who potentially identify more with the Guggenheim brand than with its programme, and a non-specific public measured in numbers. Hence it may be rightly claimed that one million visitors will turn up annually at the Guggenheim Bilbao, no matter what exhibition is on show. Apart from the privatization of the budget, the corporate turn includes also a changed profile for the curators and directors, who are increasingly appointed for their management qualities as well as their abilities for marketing, as populist politicians, their institution's programme from the viewpoint of profitability. If, therefore, in neocapitalism, there is a general social tendency to superimpose private interests on the public interest, as a consequence, the profiles for action of public positions change accordingly, including the duties of the institution's employees.

New Qualities of the Public Sphere

In the mid-1990s, the relationship between art and the public went through a reorientation which Suzan Lacy described by the term, 'New Genre Public Art'. She recognized in the artistic practices being played out outside the institutions a step from 'art in the public realm' to a 'public art'. [4] The essential quality of New Genre Public Art is the participation of groups and communities, where the projects are constituted in their relationship between art and the public sphere or a public group. [5] Lacy grounds this observation on a conception of the public sphere in conformity with a democratic model of communication based on participation. [6]

To the present day, this corresponds largely to a general conception of the quality of the public sphere as democratic in the sense of communicative and participatory. Thereby, observations of the shaping of the public sphere have shifted from Habermas's non-existent ideal of an harmonious and homogeneous whole to a space structured by diversity in which parallel, differing interests have a highly conflictual relationship with one another. This understanding provides the basis for the theories of democracy of Claude Lefort, Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau. Mouffe, for instance, describes this space as the 'agonistic public sphere'. [7] With the current trend towards privatization, monitoring, security, rivalry and exclusion in public realms, a homogeneous democratic space in which the most diverse interests can be lived and acted out next to one another in an harmonious relationship is inconceivable. Instead, the 'agonistic' model describes a plurality of different public realms emerging through a process of dissension. In the meantime, the recognition of the concept of an agonistic public can be found as a guiding thread in observations in art theory on the status of the public sphere. [8]

If the art institution is regarded as part of the public sphere, the acceptance of the dissonances arising within it as productive forces implies a new challenge consisting of generating a diversity of democratic public spheres which emerge in dissent against the hegemonic interests within society, and possibly also among each other.

In this process it can become manifest in which way the art institution is determined by a public sphere bearing the stamp of the prevailing social order, and conversely, to what extent an art institution can define the public sphere. The role and responsibility of the institution lies in recognizing its public competence and deploying its authority in a positive sense. Since the public sphere is constituted in a collective process, the participation of the public represents a central function in any view of the public realm. For Nancy Fraser, participation is the basic factor for the production of public spheres: 'Taken together, these two ideas – the validity of public opinion and the empowerment of citizens vis-à-vis the state – are indispensable for the concept of the public sphere within the framework of a theory of democracy. Without them, the concept loses its critical force and its political frame of reference. [9]

No matter whether democracy is defined as harmoniously idealistic and or as diverse and conflictual, the conception of the public sphere corresponding to these models is always based upon the ideals of a democratic, communicative exchange, of critical debate, of people coming together. But these values have long since become much less self-determined than they once were. Communication is the constant coercion permeating the neoliberal working world. People sit in endless meetings and video conferences, send and receive information, use new tools and media which are supposed to facilitate communication, and can be contacted at any time. These forms of constant exchange necessarily devalue communication and make it an end in itself. When nobody has time to do research and to adequately prepare meetings, communication is felt to be a restriction and a stress factor. Moreover, constant contactability functions as a control mechanism for hierarchical relations. Managers and directors have long since allowed themselves to be out of reach, whereas constantly being on the mobile phone is now regarded as socially inferior behaviour.

These changes in communication in the neoliberal working world with its specific value system put its democratic value into question, which to date was always regarded as the highest good of a public realm. The revaluation of communication is a part of what Negri and Hardt write about the regime of the empire and its effects. 'It not only guides human interaction, but also tries to rule directly over human nature. Social life becomes the object of domination. [10] Paolo Virno also speaks with less pathos about communication and co-operation which in post-Fordism have become the motor of capitalist relations of production and thereby in their execution mean the 'social adaptation' of the subject.[11] The decoupling of the concepts of democratic public sphere and communication is thus an essential basis for developing new models of the public sphere with the aim of making space for necessary communication which establishes meaning, instead of endless meetings, talks and appointments which in many cases merely raise the stress levels of those involved.

Transferred to the programme of an art institution, this would mean replacing a continually rising number of events on offer, resembling an entertainment programme, with a concentrated programme giving visitors the option of positioning themselves, beyond mere consumption, as active participants in the institution.

Against this background, the art institution can be conceived as a place where discourses arise which also include, in a self-reflective way, the contemporary potential of social relationships – as they are produced precisely in these institutions – their social relevance and the potential for action of communities in general. The philosopher Charles Taylor speaks in an article in *Public Culture* of institutions as places where people can imagine their existence as part of a large social structure, also fashioning their social relationships,

what they expect from them and also which normative pressures these relationships are subjected to. [12] The institution is therefore not only a place for social events where a public receives and appraises, but also offers a place for public thinking and acting which is shaped not only by the institution's staff but also by its guests and its publics.

The art institution steers these discourses by selecting themes and inviting certain guests. By selecting artists, art works, theorists, catalogue article writers, etcetera, the museum, art gallery or any other form of art institution automatically includes certain artistic, theoretical and political positions and excludes others, thereby building up the profile of its position in the public sphere. Because the physical spaces of the art institution with all their social thresholds and restrictions can only be viewed as semi-official spaces, one task of the institution is to transgress these restrictions and to confront them with democratically organized public spheres. In this sense, artists and theorists appear in their function as 'public intellectuals' who, in the institution, have a public platform for their work, on the one hand, and, on the other, through their specific work and in collaboration with the institution, can potentially produce alternative publics which deviate from the hegemonic social groups.

Profiling via Relations

In this context, the central question is how an art institution is shaped by present ideas about the public sphere and how, in turn, it can have an effect on the structure of the public sphere. Here, the special status of the art institution as a 'wild child' among the institutions comes into play and hence the thesis that the status of an institution as an instrument of the prevailing neoliberal social order of values can only be subverted by the *art* institution. How can the art institution, therefore, on the one hand, employ its general status as an institution in the sense of a socially relevant platform and, on the other, extend its special status as a marginal existence within the institutional landscape which operates at arm's length from the governmental constellation of power? It can try to set up an antithesis to the neoliberal idea of the public sphere, that is of consumption and constant, senseless communication, and to produce a non-branded space.

Since, as I have said, a stocktaking can only be achieved from the inside, the attempts begin with the structure of the institution's own institutional and institutionalized work, its positioning vis-à-vis private and public sponsors as well as the orientation of its programme and its formats. In this context the question is posed concerning the alternatives to the dependent art institution which constantly develops new fund-raising strategies, which is understaffed and overworked, has internalized the mechanisms of the free job market, without adequately profiting from it, but rather ultimately is forced to be satisfied with 'peanuts'.

Several smaller, medium-sized, and even a few larger institutions are currently occupied with the question concerning who can be the peer group for a new, transgressive art institution, and how the institution can involve diverse public groups, thus assuming an active agency within the public realm which can assert itself in society and defend a new institutional model.

In this connection, the model of a 'relational institution' currently seems to be attractive for some curators and directors. It means that the institution defines itself via its relations with various public groups, their interests and participatory potential.

MACBA in Barcelona, a museum which conceives itself, under Manuel Borja-Villel, as a pioneer in these efforts, and therefore has several times been cited by me as a fine example for experimental institutional practice in the public domain, has developed various projects in recent years which proposed new models for how art can exist in the public sphere. Thus, for instance, in its announcement for a conference under the title of 'Another Relationality. Rethinking Art as Experience' in 2005 and 2006.MACBA made its

own position in this process manifest: 'Relationality is a concept that enables us to intervene controversially in the debate on art institutions and their audiences. . . . From the standpoint of the museum, we understand the relational as a space for art that temporarily suspends institutional autonomy and explores new forms of interaction with the social. . . . We seek ways in which art can make a meaningful contribution, through its specific nature, to multiplying public spheres. And this process can be defined in terms of relations between different subjects, different forms, different spaces.' With this, macba opened up the discussion of its own position in the public sphere and announced that it would temporarily put its institutional autonomy on the back burner in order to open itself up to new, experimental social structures.

Furthermore, MACBA shifted the responsibility of the department for public programmes from a purely communicative campaign for existing exhibitions to an active post for shaping the programme and the public. The department has 'ceased to play a purely exegetic role and to restrict itself to the contents of the museum's programme, and its activities have become constitutive for the production of public spheres'.[13] This became manifest, for instance, in the planning of seminars and symposia which targeted and involved certain local public groups. One much discussed case is the collaboration with groups of activists critical of capitalism which plunged the museum into a public controversy. [14] As Carles Guerra elaborates, the 'production of a public counter-sphere' in collaboration with activists suffered under the 'fetishization' of communicative structures. These structures became visible and celebrated as aesthetic production which, however, was determined by an authorship regarded on all sides as counter-productive. Suddenly those responsible within the museum saw how a structure which had arisen under the protection of the museum operated in real-time but simultaneously outside any control.[15] Here a general problem of the public sphere is addressed which has to do with visibility, the distribution of power and control. It shows also the possible weak points in transferring the 'agonistic' model to the art institution. These lie in the question concerning the automatic legitimation also of interests which really can no longer be tolerated within the institutional profile.

Temporary Retreat

The specific experiences of MACBA suggest an extended model which adds to the relational component a strategic one of temporary retreat. The institution which finds itself in a diplomatic position between a broad public responsibility and the particular interests of the group it has invited, must mediate between the two camps. It provides the platform for formulating and publishing particular interests, and the selection of these interests and interest groups shapes the institution's profile. Because the ramifications of the project evaded institutional control from a certain point on, the museum published an agenda with a general direction and thrust that it had underwritten, which, however, in its decoupled continuation, went against the institutional profile. To stand up to public pressure and maintain one's own profile, an invisibility of certain processes, at least temporarily, is an important factor. To avoid instrumentalization from below and also censorship from above, it is necessary to especially protect the institution itself. It may seem paradoxical, but a concentrated non-public phase ultimately serves the success of a public programme. Projects that represent only the interests of a certain public group require a close, undisturbed productive phase before opening up to discussion in a larger public sphere. In this connection Brian Holmes speaks of a 'tactical necessity of disappearance'. [16]

I have tried out this element of temporary retreat within the framework of a project called *Opacity*. [17] In close collaboration with artists and curators from various institutions, and in a combination of public and non-public events, it was a matter of involving artists (whose participation in institutional processes is normally restricted to presenting the results of

their work to a public in the exhibition space) in the institutional processes of planning and decision-making which, indeed, in fact corresponds to their position as active co-producers in the art industry. The phase of spatial and temporal retreat serves to balance out the interests of artists and curators who in this project transgress their status as representatives of certain positions within the art industry. At the same time, the new question cropped up concerning how hidden spaces for action can be established and legitimated behind the scenes because, outside the art institution, which is calibrated to a constant, visible output, no one is interested in these opaque projects because they can only be viewed indirectly as a function within a value-creation process.

This retreat is distinguished from efforts in the 1990s, for instance, the New Institutionalism, which propagated a general opening-up of the building and the programme, developed the idea of the museum as a 'laboratory' and strove for curatorial innovation and the spawning of the most diverse events. Today, a tendency can already be made out of operating more behind the scenes; current efforts are increasingly directed at practising a certain retreat which provides the institution with the necessary space to involve certain definite groups, to find allies for interventions in the public domain and to build up more permanent relations with certain publics who have sympathy with the institution's approach. One example is the long-term project, *Be(com)ing Dutch* in 2006-2007. initiated by the Van Abbe Museum in Eindhoven, which combined closed thematic workshops with other formats and institutional collaborations. [18]

The present interest of some curators in the academy and in theory, too, goes in the same direction, whether it be manifest in exhibition projects or in the fact that many curators have switched over to the academic side or have a foothold in academia and curate from this position. [19] The academy represents the last refuge where work as regards content can still be done under legitimized circumstances and where one can devote oneself without distraction to theoretical reflection without having to cut oneself off completely from practice.

I see the options for contemporary art institutions to assume a relevant (counter)position within a public realm which is reconstituting itself to lie in a combination of precisely these relational concepts and an interplay with opacity. This would be a transgressive institution positioning itself in its relations to various publics, including minorities, against the populist conception of a public in consumer society with its neoliberal politicians. It would be an institution oriented towards various disciplines, thus creating alternatives to the event economy, involving its local publics and networking internationally with other platforms inside and outside the art world, temporarily retreating in order to have sensible communication in closed thematic workshops and to establish discourses, thus not enclosing its staff within the flexible management of creative industries.

This would also be an institution closer to research-based and artistic strategies than to corporate strategies, which would produce publics no longer based on the principle of prestige, but which would emerge from constant exchange among diverse interest groups. As with all institutional models, here, too, the question is posed concerning adequate financing. There is no question that the financing of art institutions everywhere represents a growing problem. But it cannot be the only solution to consume oneself in permanent fund raising and to develop ever new strategies for how to keep playing in the great game. It is apparent that an institution casting emancipatory ideas for the use of the public realm cannot fall back on the general strategies for fund raising. The question concerning how such models are to be financed coincides with the question concerning who is at all interested in supporting art institutions which do not give back what counts in the dominant contemporary social forms, namely an effective production of mass image and the revenue from a paying mass public. Private and public, thematically oriented foundations whose interests are freed from a Western standard of exhibition policy and

which try to establish self-determined transnational structures, provide a ray of hope for future financing models. Even if the major financial sources keep a distance, it is nevertheless rewarding for the sake of emancipatory publics to exploit the special status of the art institution and to play the wild child among all the other institutions.

The exhibition project 'How do we want to be governed' was presented in 2004 in various public locations in Barcelona, showing a continuous process of change.

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Footnotes

1. John R. Searle, 'What is an Institution?', in: John C. Welchman (ed.), *Institutional Critique and After* (Zurich / Los Angeles: Ringier, 2006), 21–51. cit. 50.
2. 'Whereas other institutions, like civil services, parties and unions, have a direct mandate for political action – which is also socially accepted as such – an art institution is expected to deliver and produce images or rather an "image" of what is happening outside; to transform social and subjective realities into a format in which we can handle and conserve it, but not to interfere and take an active part in the production of social and political realities. The question is, how do art institutions deal with these expectations, how do they develop room for manoeuvre, and how do they relate their work to the political contexts they are confronted with and thus also to the activities of other institutions?' Nina Möntmann, 'Art and its Institutions', in: Möntmann (ed.), *Art and its Institutions* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2006), 8–16. cit. 8.
3. 'Institutional facts only exist from the point of view of the participants.' Searle, 'What is an Institution?', op. cit (note 1), 50.
4. Suzanne Lacy, 'Cultural Pilgrimages and Metaphoric Journeys', in: *Mapping the Terrain. New Genre Public Art* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1995), 20. 'such artists adopt "public" as their operative concept and quest.'
5. 'The inclusion of the public connects theories of art to the broader population: what exists in the space between the words public and art is an unknown relationship between artist and audience, a relationship that may *itself* become the artwork.' In: Ibid.
6. See also: Miwon Kwon, 'Public Art as Publicity', in: Simon Sheikh (ed.), *In the Place of the Public Sphere?* (Berlin: b_books, 2005), 22–33. esp. 29.
7. See Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London, 2000). See also Claude Lefort, 'The Question of Democracy', first chapter of: *Democracy and Political Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minesota Press, 1988).
8. The by far earliest references are certainly to be found in Rosalyn Deutsche, who wrote already in 1996. 'Social space is produced and structured by conflicts. With this recognition, a democratic spatial politics begins.' Rosalyn Deutsche, *Evictions. Art and Spatial Politics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: MIT Press, 1996), xxiv.
9. Nancy Fraser, 'Die Transnationalisierung der Öffentlichkeit' (orig. 'Transnationalizing the Public Sphere'), in: Gerald Raunig and Ulf Wuggenig (eds.), *Publicum. Theorien der Öffentlichkeit* (Vienna: Turia & Kant, 2005).
10. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire.* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000).
11. Paolo Virno, *Grammatik der Multitude* (Berlin: ID Verlag, 2005).
12. 'I am thinking rather of the ways in which people imagine the whole of their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met and the deeper normative notions that underlie these expectations.' Charles Taylor, 'Modern Social Imaginaries', *Public Culture* Vol. 14. no. 1 (Winter 2002), 91-124. cit. 92.
13. Carles Guerra, 'Das macba – Ein unter Widrigkeiten entstandenes Museum', in: Barbara Steiner and Charles Esche (eds.), *Mögliche Museen, Jahresring 54* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung König, 2007), 149–158. cit. 155.
14. Ibid., 156–157.
15. Ibid.
16. Brian Holmes, 'Transparency & Exodus. On Political Process in the Mediated Democracies', *Open* No. 8 (Rotterdam / Amsterdam: NAi Publishers / SKOR, 2005).

17. I curated the *Opacity* project in 2005 for nifca. the Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art. The artists participating were Kajsa Dahlberg, Danger Museum, Markus Degerman, Stephan Dillemuth, Gardar Eide Einarsson and Sophie Thorsen, the institutions Index in Stockholm, uks in Oslo, Secession in Vienna and nifca itself. Apart from internal workshops we realized an exhibition at uks. a fanzine and a panel discussion at Secession.
18. www.becomingdutch.com.
19. See, for instance, the project a.k.a.d.e.m.i.e., a collaboration between the Siemens Art Program and the Van Abbe Museum Eindhoven, MuHKA Antwerpen, Kunstverein Hamburg, Department of Visual Cultures at Goldsmith College in London, 2005.

Tags

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