From the Populist Museum to the Research Platform: New Art Exhibition Practices Today

Vicky Chainey Gagnon
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From sheer entertainment to academic education, today a full range of formats exists in the institutional practice of contemporary art, making them undeniable sites of contradiction. Since the mid-1990s, a wide range of institutional re-organizations and philosophical shifts have led to more participatory and redefinition, opening up and creating new practices. Views of the rise of temporary exhibition, biennales and platforms, these new formats of display practices now use the object itself to generate catalysts for discussion. In other cases, the object is bypassed altogether, revealing another kind of authority.

Starting in the 1980s, the group-exhibition became the primary site for curatorial experiment and forged new public spaces and forms of reception for art both inside and outside of art institutions. Key examples include Group Material’s early exhibition projects in the public space, DA ZI BAOS (1982), M5 (1982) and Subculture (1983), as well as curator Mary Jane Jacob’s site-specific exhibition projects Places with a Past (1991) and Culture in Action (1992-1993). These modes of exhibition-making outside of the museum—openly political and experimental—would influence the context of development both for New Institutionalism and for the research platforms that are in proliferation since the early 2000s. I would add here the expanded programming that Catherine David developed for Documenta X (1997) in which 100 Days – 100 Guests enabled conversations outside the exhibition space. As well, Okwui Enwonwu’s Documenta XI (2002) took the idea farther with Platforms—five symposia, taking place around the world. Exhibition experiments today define the discourse around the contemporary art institution, which is epitomized by critical writings in journals such as The Exhibitionist, Manifesta Journal, Tate Papers, Art Monthly, and Mousse Magazine. But how do these new curatorial narratives and methods go beyond the borders of the museum? What channels and currencies exist in institutional practice today?

Many large art museums today have become subsumed within the field of the economic marketplace and its goal of exchange for profit. Within cultural policy, these art museums are often conceptualized around an economic audit and included as part of the ‘creative industries.’ This is the branding phenomenon central to corporate globalization that ushered in fundamental changes and new economies for art institutions in the mid 1990s, triggering a process of economization. The neoliberal ‘experience economy’ was charged with orchestrating memorable events for consumers and significantly added to the momentum of change in art institutions—especially in regard to the business model, which has been shaped by the example of the economy. The memorable was the creation of a new ‘universal type’ of museum, exemplified through monumental and signature architecture meant to stimulate cultural tourism across territories (Guggenheim Bilbao and Louvre Lens, for example). Signs of the market were also to be seen in an increased number of commercialized spaces such as gift shops and visitor services. Inside the exhibition halls, blockbuster shows were called upon to help pick up the tab of marketing strategies no longer address the needs of contemporary artists or their work. Instead, they decided to explore the exhibition as a testing ground for changing the mechanisms through which institutions typically operate. According to curator Charles Esche, the project of New Institutionalism was nothing short of resisting the ‘totality of global capitalism.’ (Later in 2001, Esche would write that the art museum should be “part community center, part laboratory and part academy, with less need for the established showroom function.”)

An example here is Maria Lind’s work at the Kunsthalle München in Germany between 2002 and 2004 where she orchestrated several experimental projects such as Totally motivated: A sociocultural manœuvre, a project in collaboration with five curators and ten artists that aimed to examine the relationship between amateur and professional. Another interesting example is An Archive and Three Case Studies, an exhibition that reflected on mediation work within the Kunsthalle München—which was celebrating its 180-year history—by inviting artists Mabe Bethônico and Liam Gillick to intervene in the institution’s archives. The goal of the project as a whole was to reflect upon and propose new avenues for mediation at the Kunsthalle München. The project included several public programmes, or modules, also focusing on the dialogical event as a way to stimulate reflection on participatory, socially engaged artworks.

Ultimately, with New Institutionalism, artwork came to be conceived of as a meeting place, and a point of reflection on the meaning of the institution as a structuring instance that shapes social interactions. Inviting the public to participate in the communicative process was an invitation to become an active collaborator; importantly, this was viewed as a necessary step towards more democracy in public spaces. It also demonstrates a fusion of sorts between curatorial and educational work, the latter now called upon mediate between the public, the artwork and the institution. Critics of New Institutionalism stated that they focused too much on a “positivist emphasis on quantity and a technocratic approach to collaboration—collaboration as networking, as a means of achieving or simulating growth and dominance.”

* New Institutionalism left a legacy of engagement and critical public programming that can be found today in research platforms. In the 2000s, many institutions adopted the form of the platform as a way to display information, to engage audiences through critical debate and also to find a wider context for art making. These platforms were typically set up as a network across several institutions (New Museum’s Hub project which grouped public programming across six institutions) or as a central hub around which invited writers could publish. As an example there is the European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies (Eiccp) in Vienna that between 2002-2005 launched the platform republicart as an independent trans-national, publishing program focused on interventionist and activist practices of art. (http://republicart.net/) Under the directorship of Charles Esche, the Van Abbemuseum in the Netherlands undertook thematic, long-term programming between 2006-2008 entitled Becoming Dutch. This programming featured debates, reading groups, artist’s projects, exhibitions and residencies that investigated fundamental questions about cultural identity and normative ‘national’ values. (http://www.becomingdutch.com/)

The former West project is an interesting case study as a contemporary research platform because it regularly produces exhibitions in relation to the research question. (http://www.formerwest.org/) Produced by the art institution BAK, basis voor actuele kunst in the Netherlands, Former West is conceived as a long-term (2008-2014) international project that combines research, education, and publishing. Specifically, it aims to imagine possible futures after 1989 and since the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall. Through its actions, and making its research process public—a real paradigm of public scholarship today. Former West posits that their programming activities can lead to new horizons of thinking on subjects as broad as the future of Western civilization. Its mandate states the following: Reflects upon the changes introduced to the world (and thus to the so-called West) by the political, cultural, artistic, and economic events of 1989; Engages in rethinking the global histories of the last two decades in dialogue with...
post-communist and postcolonial thought; and Speculates about a “post-bloc” future that recognizes differences, yet evolves through the political imperative of equality and the notion of “one world.”

Through its online archive of its symposia, lectures and interviews, Former West acts as a research platform on which regular input brings attention to very specific problematics, themes and artistic practices.5 This also shifts the curatorial role, which here acts, as curator Maria Lind writes: “...like an active catalyst, generating twists, turns and tensions—owing much to site-specific and context-sensitive practices and even more to various traditions of institutional critique.”6

Politically motivated curatorial practices offer the possibility of reframing voices rather than in conformity with the institution's objectifying strategies. The institution at its best, we need to “balance the need for private experimentation and political tools for visual art” In my view, institutions of critique should be relevant questions and make real possibilities that should not be bypassed.7

In many ways, I think that non-collecting institutions probably have more leverage space in their programming to explore this type of institutional posture. Nonetheless, every institution should at least attempt to remain critical about what it means to produce culture in this passing age of global capitalism. This critical posture could create multilayer networks of knowledge, casting light on the kinds of work that needs to be done in institutional practice and also raise relevant questions and make real possibilities that should not be bypassed.

Vicky Chainey Gagnon

Vicky Chainey Gagnon is a curator with a practice focused on contemporary art and civic engagement. She works as the Director/Curator of the Foreman Art Lab, a cultural mediation project that investigates social issues with citizens from the local community. She teaches Museology in the Art History and Theory program, Bishop's University.

Notes
1 Curator Jens Hoffman writes: “While larger museums have used non-exhibition-centered programming to attract bigger and more diverse audiences, smaller institutions that are less audience-focused and more intellectually and politically minded have discovered that these non-exhibition-based curatorial efforts offer ways to move beyond the traditions of concept by way of artworks in a white cube.” Jens Hoffmann, “A Plea for Exhibitions,” Mousette Magazine, no. 24 (June 2009), http://www.mousette magazine.it/. Consulted October 2, 2011.
4 At GMB [Guggenheim Museum Bilbao] 70 percent of operating costs must be covered by museum revenue and 30 percent by the local government. As a consequence, fulfills tax budgetary predictions implies a commitment to attracting the highest number of visitors possible, normally through special exhibitions.” Beatriz Plaza, “The Bilbao Effect (Guggenheim Museum Bilbao),” Faculty of Economics, University of the Basque Country, published July 11, 2007. www.mspa.ub.unl-muenchen.de/. Consulted October 2, 2011.
6 Ibid 14.
7 Many of so-called ‘New Institutions’ were concentrated in north-central Europe (the Nordic countries, the Netherlands and Germany), bringing together from 1999 to 2002: Nicolas Schaafhausen at the Kunsthalle, Karlsruhe; Mania Flavio at the Galleria Scala in Malmo and Kunstverein München respectively. (Alex Farquharson, “Bureaux de Change,” Freize, no. 101 [September 2006]. Available at http://www.freize.com/ issue/article/bureaux_de_change/ . Consulted October 2, 2011.
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