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

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 institutions—reacting to the rise of the populist museum—has undergone reflection and redefinition, opening up and creating new practices.¹ Viewed in the rise of the temporary exhibition, biennales and platforms, these new forms 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 experimentation and forged new public spaces and forms of reception for art both inside and outside of art institutions.² 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 Jacobs'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 Enwezor'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?

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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.'³ 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 biennale model, which proliferated at this time. One example of the economy of 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 new museum experiences.⁴

Mitigating the corporatisation of the museum and art institutions was the changing contexts of exhibition-making. The discursive turn in curating that Paul O'Neill writes about shifted exhibition-making into a contemporary form of rhetoric⁵ and extended the field beyond the mechanisms of staging exhibitions to include different intellectual spheres, mirroring what Brian Holmes names the extra-disciplinary impulse in art-making. Exhibitions became ideological texts intended to make private intentions, such as institutional biases, more public.⁶ The exhibition-as-forum model was used to speak on varied global subjects such as the shrinking welfare state, the privatization of public space and new modes of governmentality. An example here is Group Material, an artist group based in New York and active between 1979-1996, who focused on collaborative projects aiming to build exhibition forms that could visualize the democratic process. Their seminal exhibition *Democracy* 1988-89 presented at the Dia Art Foundation in New York combined four thematically related exhibitions with many roundtables, or Town Halls that discussed the AIDS crisis and cultural politics. Bringing popular education and critical pedagogy to exhibitions, Group Material's experimentations offered other spaces for the representation and dissemination of art and culture. Focusing on dialogue and participatory dynamics enabled Group Material's display strategies to go beyond a simple critique of the bourgeois public sphere for its exclusions; the participatory exhibition was able to question perceptions about the possibility of activist positions within the art institution by engaging with different processes of narration.

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In the 1990s, the shift towards curatorial activism became grounded anew in institutional sites, and triggered debate on the lack of critical reflection about the art institution as a site of dissemination. Institutions like BAK, Witte de

With, Garanti Platform and Palais de Tokyo focused on exploratory projects that created contexts for subjectivity and articulating agency and action. In the late 1990s, New Institutionalism emerged as a new model for museum management that offered alternate possibilities for the progressive art museum. This was a loose association of individuals—many of whom were former independent curators and had recently become directors of art institutions and museums— who chose no pre-determined program of action. As Claire Doherty writes: "These dialogic projects speculate that conventional art institutional time-frames, programming and staffing structures, distribution mechanisms and marketing strategies no longer address the needs of contemporary artists or their work."⁸ 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.'⁹ (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 Kunstverein München in Germany between 2002 and 2004 where she orchestrated several experimental projects such as *Totally motivated: A sociocultural manoeuvre*, a project in collaboration with five curators and ten artists that aimed to examine the relationship between 'amateur' and 'professional.' Another interesting example is *Telling Histories: an Archive and Three Case Studies*, an exhibition that reflected on mediation work within the Kunstverein 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 Kunstverein 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 partake in the communicative process is 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."¹⁰

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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 activate 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 (Eipcp) 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 *Be(com)ing 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,¹¹ Former West is conceived as a long-term (2008-2014) international project that combines exhibitions with 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. As well, there is a concerted effort to test the exhibition in the context of a much wider discourse of lectures, interviews and writing, and thus create a framework on which the exhibition and public programming’s long-term impact can be studied. Former West’s gestures resist the representative/illustrative tendency and instead treat exhibitions and events as subjective political tools that produce complex expressions of persuasion and generate value.¹² 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.”¹³

Politically motivated curatorial practices offer the possibility of reframing voices and producing agency by building situated accounts of the encounter with art and the museum, rather than strictly institutionalized or conceptualized ones. Civically engaged and reflective practices such as the Former West projects and earlier, ‘New Institutionalism’ experiments can also teach us about new encounters with the institution: what it is to be there, how we engage, what responses we receive, and therefore how we develop subjectivity:

“To question an institution and its practices is seen as a means of placing the viewer’s cultural agency in the service of the development of his/her subjectivity rather than in conformity with the institution’s objectifying strategies. The status attributed to such questioning is not without difficulty, however. For, to constitute the conditions of a museum encounter in terms of a question – what is it that I am doing here? What do I want from this situation? Where I am?— leads, as one can see, to a questioning of the self: What is being asked of me in this situation? Who is asking? Who am I?”¹⁴

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Can research platforms, as models for a new institution of critique be analytical and political tools for visual art? In my view, institutions of critique should be embedded discourses that will help us to gain insight into our own positions within neoliberal society, and further, that allow the users of those institutions to narrate their experiences for themselves. Sustained practices like research platforms produce accumulations of thinking on specific global subjects, generating alternate worldviews and potentially producing small-scale forms of democracy in the world today. More input from a wide range of publics using these platforms could assist in shifting the usage of art institutions and also aid in resisting the impulse to commodify the art experience.

Platforms should also be studied as a demonstration of where collaboration and activism come together. Curator Charles Esche writes that to use the institution at its best, we need to “balance the need for private experimentation with public discussion, especially as the forums for a generalised intervention are reducing as public space is privatised.”¹⁵ This demands a different type of institutional posture, one where exhibitions are seen as complex and plural sites where subjects such as democracy and the micro-politics and fictions of the public sphere can be studied. To achieve this goal of producing embedded discourses, a concerted effort needs to be maintained to reclaim institutional histories and recognize the innovations of exhibition-making practices from the past, present and future. For it is an undeniable fact that today’s expanded cultural function of curating not only generates exhibitions for audiences to view, but also questions the nature of aesthetic experience, the authority of institutions and the construction of knowledge.

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

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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 traditional concept of exhibitions as displays of artworks in a white cube.” Jens Hoffmann, “A Plea for Exhibitions,” *Mousse Magazine*, no. 24 (June 2009). <http://www.moussemagazine.it/>. Consulted October 2, 2011.

- 2 Paul O’Neill. “The Curatorial Turn: From Practice to Discourse.” *Issues in Curating Contemporary Art and Performance*. Judith Rugg, Michèle Sedgwick, Eds. Bristol: Intellect Books, 2007: 14.
- 3 “[T]he public are increasingly referred to as consumers and the institution’s activities are driven towards income producing targets and aligned with the interests of commercial entertainment industries.” Claire Doherty, “New Institutionalism and the Exhibition as Situation,” *Protections: This is not an Exhibition*. Budak, A. and Pakesch, P., Eds. Graz: Kunsthaus Graz, 2006: 172-8. Also available at www.situations.org.uk/media/files/New_Institutionalism.pdf
- 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, fulfilling the 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 31, 2007. www.mpra.uni-muenchen.de/. Consulted October 2, 2011.
- 5 Paul O’Neill. “The Curatorial Turn: From Practice to Discourse.” *Issues in Curating Contemporary Art and Performance*. Judith Rugg, Michèle Sedgwick, Eds. Bristol: Intellect Books, 2007: 15.
- 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: Nicolaus Schafhausen at the Kunstverein Frankfurt; Maria Hlavajova at BAK in Utrecht; Nicolas Bourriaud and Jérôme Sans at the Palais de Tokyo; Vasif Kortun founded Platform Garanti Contemporary Art in Istanbul; and Catherine David, Charles Esche and Maria Lind took charge of Witte de With in Rotterdam, Rooseum in Malmo and Kunstverein München respectively. (Alex Farquharson, “Bureaux de Change,” *Frieze*, no. 101 (September 2006). Available at http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/bureaux_de_change/. Consulted October 2, 2011.
- 8 Claire Doherty, “New Institutionalism and the Exhibition as Situation,” *Protections: This is not an Exhibition*. Budak, A. and Pakesch, P., Eds. Graz: Kunsthaus Graz, 2006: 172-8. Also available at www.situations.org.uk/media/files/New_Institutionalism.pdf Consulted October 2, 2011.
- 9 Alex Farquharson, “Bureaux de change,” *Frieze*, no. 101 (September 2006). Available at http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/bureaux_de_change/ Consulted October 2, 2011.
- 10 Sven Lütticken, “Once More on Publicness: A Postscript to Secret Publicity,” *Filip*, no. 12 (Fall 2010): 86-91.
- 11 “The philosophy of BAK is to make the art of our own time, and its developments towards tomorrow, accessible. <http://www.bak-utrecht.nl>.
- 12 Paul O’Neill. “The Curatorial Turn: From Practice to Discourse.” *Issues in Curating Contemporary Art and Performance*. Judith Rugg, Michèle Sedgwick, Eds. Bristol: Intellect Books, 2007: 14.
- 13 Maria Lind, “The Curatorial,” *Selected Maria Lind Writing*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011: 57-66.
- 14 David Dibosa, “The Self that Follows the Discipline: Visual Cultures and the Tate Encounters Research Project, Edition 4.” Tate Online, 2008 as cited in “Post-critical Museology”, Available at <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/majorprojects/tate-encounters/edition-4/>. Consulted October 12, 2011.
- 15 Charles Esche, “What’s the Point of Art Centres Anyway? - Possibility, Art and Democratic Deviance.” http://www.republicart.net/disc/institution/esche01_en.htm Consulted October 2, 2011.