

SELF-ORGANISED

Stine Hebert & Anne Szefer Karlsen (Eds.)

Centre for Contemporary Art Centre

Open Editions
45 Handforth Road
London SW9 0LL
United Kingdom

+ 44 (0)20 7820 9779
info@openeditions.com
www.openeditions.com

Hordaland Art Centre
Klosteret 17
PB 1745 Nordnes
5816 Bergen
Norway
+47 55 90 85 90
www.kunstcenter.no

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Occasional Table

Anthony Davis, Stephen Dijkstra
& John Kinsman

Elwyn Legg, Corrie Lurie & Gary Hill

Samuel Shapiro

John Kelly

John Goss

John Goss

Adrian Karam

John Kelly

John Kelly

John Kelly & John Kelly

John Kelly & John Kelly

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Occasional Table

Julie Ault
Maibritt Borgen
Céline Condorelli & Johan Frederik Hartle
Anthony Davies, Stephan Dillemath
& Jakob Jakobsen
Ekaterina Degot, Charles Esche & David Riff
Barnaby Drabble
Jonas Ekeberg
Linus Elmes
Juan A Gaitán
Abdellah Karroum
Livia Pancu
Jan Verwoert
What, How & For Whom/WHW

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FOREWORD

Stine Hebert, Anne Szefer Karlsen
& David Blamey

DAVID BLAMEY My understanding of the term 'self-organised' within the art context is that it describes how groups, collectives, and other networks of individuals can operate independently from institutional and corporate structures. Self-organised initiatives appear to have strived to be non-hierarchical and conduct their decision-making processes along the lines of open participatory models. Some have developed counter-economic strategies as an alternative to traditional capitalist organisational principles that are perhaps, in the view of the self-organisers, exploitive or reliant on top-down power dynamics. Was it your intention to reassess this commonly held view? Have you observed an evolution of the term, or a shift that warrants a re-appraisal?

ANNE SZEFER KARLSEN Many of these principles still apply, but we don't believe that looking at self-organisation as part of an opposing dichotomy is any longer possible. However, we started out with this opposition in mind. Our investigations have focussed on self-organisation beyond the limiting labels of 'alternative', 'non-profit' or 'artist-run', which have been the prevailing terms dominating discussions of both the subject and its history in recent times. Looking at self-organisation as merely a response doesn't take into consideration that the choice to be 'self-organised' implies a certain dualistic dependency, between the self – an individual – and an organised community within society. We see this dependency as being governed by common interest more than formality and obligation. The field of self-organisation is therefore more complex than the conventional separatist approach entails. It has moved beyond a process of simply dissolving boundaries between institutional and non-institutional platforms to creating new possibilities.

STINE HEBERT It should also be stated that we have deliberately focussed on self-organisation within the art world rather than as a general phenomenon in society. Self-organisation has otherwise been discussed primarily in social-political commentaries, such as in: *Self-Organisation/Counter-Economic Strategies* (edited by Will Bradley, Mika Hannula, Cristina Ricupero and Superflex) from 2006, or in the reader on art and labour, *Work Work Work* from 2012 (edited by Jonatan Habib Engqvist, Annika Engqvist, Michele Masucci, Lisa Rosendahl and Cecilia Widenheim). Self-organisation is of topical interest at the moment and in 2012 alone we have seen the following publications come out: *Institutions by Artists* (edited by Jeff Khonsary and Kristina Lee Podesva) which documents a conference

in Vancouver that aimed to evaluate the performance and promise of contemporary artist-run centres and initiatives; *Institution for the Future* (edited by Biljana Ciric and Sally Lai) presenting reflections by artists, curators and other cultural workers on what an institution for the future should and needs to look like; and *Artist Run Spaces* (edited by Gabriele Detterer and Maurizio Nannucci) focusing on artist-run spaces of the 1960s-1970s. One of our intentions has been to supplement these earlier discussions and so we have narrowed the focus and aimed at counterbalancing the existing works that historicise the subject of self-organisation by locating it within a limited geographical context, during a specific period of time.

ANNE SZEFER KARLSEN This anthology is also inspired by the recent surge of history writing in the non-institutional field. Increasing volumes of books and seminars have surfaced during the last couple of years showing an active engagement with the historicisation of the field by the very same people involved in it. An absence of competing accounts has allowed the practitioners involved to write themselves into history – ironically, often employing the same strategies as their institutional cousins. The resulting potential for self-mythologising projects that would otherwise be forgotten caught our attention and raised an important question in our minds: do the self-organised subjects of today situate themselves differently from the past and if so, how? Stepping back from the ‘outsider’ position seems to be an important determining factor and so we have also been interested in investigating the driving forces that make a non-institutional initiative transform itself into an institutional structure.

DAVID BLAMEY If you have detected that in some instances the purity of self-organised ideals being expounded in the late 1990s and early 00s have become corrupted, looking through the other end of the telescope, could it also be suggested that some art institutions have begun to adopt the methods of self-organisation, but perhaps without reforming their inner most intentions. If so, are there any particular examples that you could site that would bring this observation into focus?

STINE HEBERT In the spring of 2010 we were able to observe close at hand the celebration of the tenth anniversary of Tate Modern in London through the event, *No Soul for Sale – A Festival of Independents*, as both of us were

invited to participate by two of the ‘independents’ that took part. This turned out to be a highly unconventional celebration of a museum’s first decade of institutional service and on many levels a contradictory site in which to encounter so many non-institutions. Each of the 70 so-called independent initiatives that were invited to take part was assigned a demarcated space in the museum’s Turbine Hall. The overall experience functioned as a kind of chaotic bazaar. Unfortunately the museum didn’t offer any financial support to the contributors that participated in this celebration, and only minimal organisational assistance. The fact that most invited participants so readily accepted these terms demonstrated to us an important lesson about how the institutional art world sustains itself: the value of the institution’s embrace still offers enough prestige and power to compensate for the problematic conditions on offer. However, we have to concede that this dependency is mutual, as the institution in this case desired to be associated with the energy and free spirit only found outside of its own heavy museum bureaucracy.

DAVID BLAMEY But this idea about a mutual dependency of conflicting interests could be seen as being an essential precept to the wider mechanics of art’s production and consumption. Certainly in my lifetime there has always been a discernable link.

ANNE SZEFER KARLSEN Indeed. An example of a project that productively considers such a relationship would be the retrospective exhibition, *Trauma 1-11: Stories About the Free University in Copenhagen and the Surrounding Society in the Last Ten Years* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Roskilde, Denmark (2011). Copenhagen Free University (CFU) was a project co-founded by Henriette Heise and Jakob Jakobsen in their apartment in the Nørrebro district, which was also the artists’ home. Between 2001-07 CFU operated as a space for research and knowledge exchange. It hosted activities such as workshops, film screenings, lectures, small exhibitions and produced publications. Heise and Jakobsen developed the exhibition project *Trauma 1-11* in collaboration with Emma Hedditch, Howard Slater and Anthony Davies and it was conceived as a poetic representation of how the experiences of their practice within CFU and in society affected each other. The exhibition was presented as a 60-minute sound walk through the museum’s spaces where the audience encountered propaganda material, props and remnants from the CFU as well as new works. The commentary leading the audience through the exhibition was transmitted through a recorded voiceover. It told the story of CFU’s

establishment in Heise and Jakobsen's home, recalled the reasons to cease activities, and explained how years later they were informed by the Danish government that it had become illegal by Danish law to use the term 'university' for anything but state authorised institutions. Presenting this kind of exhibition in a museum context raised some interesting questions about history writing and about what gets included, as well as excluded, from the archive. The exhibition provoked thoughts on the status of self-organisation on many levels and in particular, it emphasised one of our assumptions: that when an institution, or non-institution for that matter, decides *not* to cave into instrumental demands, that is the moment when the self-organised crystallises and becomes visible.

DAVID BLAMEY Two thoughts immediately come to mind from this example. Firstly, that this discursive method of working mirrors the rise of curatorial practices that have taken place over the same period. Secondly, that this CFU exhibition was mounted in the same year as your Tate example – presumably drawing from the same well of ideas, but with a strikingly different flavour.

STINE HEBERT Yes, these cases highlight very different approaches to collaborative work between non-institutional and institutional platforms. *No Soul for Sale* received harsh criticism for its barely-concealed exploitive undertones, while the *Trauma 1-11* exhibition proved to be a more productive example of a museum hosting an independent project's poetic exploration of its own history writing – with a result that was in fact empowering for both. Ultimately, the two exhibitions accentuate the gravity of mutual dependency that you make the argument for, in their own ways.

It's also true that the last twenty or so years have seen a blossoming debate on the development of curatorial practice. Discussions have necessarily taken place as a consequence of the gradual – one could also say inevitable – institutionalisation of the curator, as well as an increased segregation of discussions on conventional institutional and non-institutional structures. This tendency has manifested itself widely and can be observed in discourses dealing with curatorial practice, artist-run spaces, *kunsthalls*, biennials, art education, museums and of course, the development of institutional critique in all its facets. Our discussions have been closely linked to the development of the field of curating, but we have approached the subject of self-organisation without taking the curatorial as a starting point *per se*. Instead, our aim has been to open our examinations up for all contexts where art is commissioned, produced and displayed. Another

question then that we would like to raise is about what the relationship between the self and community is. In this case between the individual, the art system and crucially, society at large.

DAVID BLAMEY So you are accepting of the idea that the art world – or our mainstream European province of the global art world – operates as a kind of matrix of independent and institutional positions, but in re-examining the presumption that these are somehow rival or conflicting standpoints, have developed a more holistic picture. One of the things that interest me here is the hint of communalism that's entering this discussion. When you talk about 'community' and 'society' in relation to the 'self', are you proposing that an analysis of the responses that you received from contributors points to the possibility of some kind of social transformation?

STINE HEBERT It is dangerous to claim that self-organisation holds transformative potential in itself – that could easily be mistaken for business management jargon and capitalism's vicious capacity to profit by absorbing the alternative. As Jan Verwoert's article expresses, the state of society today forces you to organise yourself – either on your own, or together with others. But this line of reasoning should not be mistaken for a situation based on total freedom. Rather, the urge to self-organise stems from the struggle to survive. It is a response to the political climate and all the implications of our changing economic situation. There is certainly an urgent need to take action and realise other economies outside of the capitalist production paradigm. A couple of propositions for this can be found among our contributors here: Céline Condorelli points at friendship as the core support structure for a better way of living; Barnaby Drabble speaks about the potential liberation of 'de-organisation' as the only way to change our over-managed lives; and WHW proposes to employ another temporality in our everyday life – waiting, not as a passive withdrawal, but rather as an insistence on allowing room for criticality to develop by testing out and gradually assessing new modalities for art production.

DAVID BLAMEY All of this raises a question in my mind about the continuing draw of institutional power, particularly since we are in a period where across all sections of society there is such a general lack of confidence in institutions, such as the banking system and the press. In the UK, our economic, social and political difficulties are seen as being linked to a general decline in institutional integrity.

STINE HEBERT In the seminal text from 2005, 'There is no alternative: the future is self-organised, part 1' (TINA), co-authored by Anthony Davies, Stephan Dillemoth and Jakob Jakobsen, the argument is put forward for the revolutionary potential of a future of self-organisation. The manifesto criticises existing institutional structures for operating by principles instigated by private corporations and for losing sight of their public obligation. The authors thereby claim self-organisation as the only way to proceed from this point of departure. In the years passing from when this text was written, the financial crisis impacted as a global phenomenon and caused a total collapse of many large institutions. Following these dramatic changes in society, the trio has felt compelled to revise their text for this anthology and TINA2 speaks of self-organisation as a radical process that continuously challenges the fixed relationships our society is built upon – between the self, the individual and the institution.

ANNE SZEFER KARLSEN As curators and educators ourselves, working both independently and institutionally, we are actively involved in questioning the complicated relationships that underpin our work. The experience of moving between different platforms and operating with multiple voices has made the need to reassess conventionally fixed positions in the art world imperative at this time. The problem of how to position the self-organised within this paradoxical and changing environment has therefore informed the analysis within this book.

STINE HEBERT In asking writers, artists, art historians, curators, and critics as well as museum directors to present a singular take on self-organisation based on their own experiences, we have sought to analyse the topic using both empirical and theoretical tools. The diversity of this approach is intended to mirror the pluralism of the scene. We therefore begin with a group of contextual readings of the self-organised; this is followed by a series of case studies written by people who reflect upon their own activities over varying distances and times; and we conclude with more polemic statements that speculate about the future. Instead of getting bogged down by semantics this volume does not then attempt to map the territory and its historical development in the art world, but rather, it hopes to question and reorient an understanding of what it means to be 'self-organised.'

ON DE-ORGANISATION

Barnaby Drabble

OR, WHAT ONE CAN DO, WHAT ONE DOES, WHAT ONE AIMS TO DO, WHAT ONE ALLOWS TO BE DONE, HOW PRECISE AND DEFINED ONE'S AIMS ARE AT THE OUTSET, WHAT ONE REFUSES TO DO, WHO ONE REFUSES TO DO IT WITH, WHO ONE, IDEALLY, WOULD LIKE TO DO IT WITH, WHO ONE ENDS UP DOING IT WITH, WHY ONE DOES IT, WHY ONE IS TEMPTED NOT TO DO IT, WHY ONE THINKS ONE IS DOING IT, WHY OTHERS THINK ONE IS DOING IT, HOW, IN THE END, IT GETS DONE.

(1)

If, like myself, you are a fan of polemics, it doesn't get much better than Anthony Davies, Stephan Dillemath and Jakob Jakobsen's freely distributed rant 'There is No Alternative: THE FUTURE IS SELF-ORGANISED'.⁽¹⁾ Neoliberal politics, corporations, managerial elites, the art market, and ultimately the museum and anyone who works within it, are ticked off here like a surgeon listing malignant tumours for urgent removal. At the heart of the text is the authors' call for the abolition of all art institutions on the grounds that they are socially and morally corrupt, and that they, like the governments that support them, are incapable of imagination, and deliberately ignorant of any forms of social organisation outside those prescribed by the demands of capital. In their eyes, even those critical souls who have collaborated with the institutions in the hope of changing them (and here they include themselves) are deluded, and should cease such collaborations immediately. The future, they proclaim, is self-organised.

But, if the future is self-organised, which definition of self-organisation are we talking about? At first glance this ever more popular term appears to have a broad range of connotations, even within the relatively refined context of the arts. Without overly getting into semantics, it is worth considering how these two words sit together in relation to any imagined future production. The 'self' in self-organised can be seen as operative in two ways: firstly it denotes the individual subject (him or herself), and, secondly, an idea of reflexivity (where the subject and object of an activity are identical). Similarly, the word 'organisation' has two applications: on the one hand as a process of bringing things into

1. Anthony Davies, Stephan Dillemath and Jakob Jakobsen, 'There is No Alternative: THE FUTURE IS SELF-ORGANISED', Part 1, in Nina Möntmann (ed.), *Art and its Institutions. Current Conflicts, Critique and Collaborations*, Black Dog, 2006, pp. 176-8.

order, and on the other as a group of subjects engaged in a common endeavour. In the light of these dual meanings, self-organisation in the arts has come to mean both a process of self-determined organising (as opposed to being organised by someone else) and an entity, an organisation of subjects created by the participants on their own terms (as opposed to one created for them to operate within).

Although radical in its call for an absolute takeover, 'There is No Alternative' upholds the traditional point of view that self-organisation is predominantly a tool for the little man with which to work in spite of, or in opposition to, the predominant system. In the arts the 'self' in question is frequently the artist, and for the most part the 'someone else' that commonly plays the organising role or provides the predetermined context for labour, can be identified as the institution, the museum, the market or the academy. In addition, a cloud of related terms hangs around the term self-organisation, referring to processes and structures that undermine, circumnavigate or critique the domination of culture by institutional and commercial agendas. 'Artist-run', 'independent curator', 'alternative space', 'bottom up', 'DIY', 'no-budget', 'open source', 'free school', 'counter public' and 'project-based', are just a few of these. Yet, if the departure point in the arts is frequently an 'us versus them' stance, the diversity of ideas in this small cloud of terms alone reminds us just how broad a spectrum of activities the term self-organisation has come to be applied to, a premise perhaps for the overall discussion of this publication about whether, taken together, these activities may constitute an institution in and of themselves.

(2)

Davies, Dillemath and Jakobsen are fully aware of the looseness of the term they discuss and are quick to point out that self-organisation is too frequently, and, in their view incorrectly, equated with the plethora of home-grown initiatives that adopt the logics of creative entrepreneurship. As part of a lengthy passage, in which the authors point at the ways in which the term is misunderstood and misapplied, they argue that self-organisation 'should not be confused with self-enterprise or self-help, it is not an alternative or a conduit into the market. It isn't a label, logo, brand or flag under which to sail in the waters of neoliberalism.' Similarly, they dismiss established socially engaged artistic positions,

and institutionally critical positions that none the less use the institution as an arena, declaring that these serve only to portray the 'sad farce, the vacant charade that passes for political action and engagement in the art system.' Whether we agree with their prognosis or not, it is interesting to see the authors placing issues of marketing and credibility at the heart of what they see as the problem with institutions. We might talk here of a crisis in the representative function of the traditional art institution, with 'representation' here to be understood not only in its socio-political, but also in its aesthetic sense. By noting the undeniable tendency towards brand building by the larger institutions and arguing that the politics within them have become a 'charade', the focus is brought to bear on the question whether these institutions have become so tied up in the 'business' of representation, and the expediency this entails, that they have forgotten to pay attention to the nature of the practices they are tasked to look after.

Today we are often told that institutional production constitutes a cultural 'offer', of which we can consider whether we wish to take it up or ignore. This idea of culture as an offer from the state is underlined by the 'use them or lose them' logic with which right-wing politicians are dismantling funding for many publicly funded arts organisations in Europe these days. Conveniently, this discourse is forgetful of the fact that it has been the citizens, by way of their tax and (in some countries) lottery tickets, who have indirectly given many of these structures life in the first place. Unconnected to this spend is the fact that culture is not something the state offers to us: quite the opposite, culture is inherently 'ours', emerging as it does through a creative process of interaction and collaboration between citizens, in relation to their environment. Those institutions that increasingly seek to crowd-please are at fault when they forget the fact that they are tasked with providing a space for public culture, in all its discursive complexity, and instead seek to represent culture 'to the public', in an easily consumable fashion. For such institutions, content (and here read 'arts practices') is required per se to reciprocate the agendas written up in their 'mission' statement. Only that which can be argued as compatible with their marketing strategy is given space. This back-to-front situation is a 'charade' indeed, a moment at which culture becomes a game of silently acting out trivial things, in order to pass the time.

In the light of this, the precise difference between self-organisation, self-enterprise, self-help and any number of other self-words

(including self-interest) remains, in practice, remarkably hard to hold on to. At the heart of this problem is the fact that oddly similar individualistic ideas of the 'self' find themselves at the centre of radically different views of social reality, be it the discerning consumer self at the heart of the capitalist daydream (because you're worth it) or empowered revolutionary selves pitching their individual expression against the power of the state and the corporations (because I won't fall for their lies). To put it another way, the nature of self-organised activity often depends more on which particular self is doing the organising than on the activity itself. Human beings, inevitably, have a habit of screwing up the best laid of plans.

So, when the authors envisage 'an organisation of deregulated selves', which is 'at its core a non-identity' we should recognise, acutely at this moment, the clear need for art and its institutions to step outside the representational economic space that is increasingly prescribed for it within the political arena; the need to stop representing culture and actively provide a space for its production. Similarly, in suggesting that opposing what is happening is an 'organisational' task, we should identify that such an endeavour can only be undertaken when we do it together. Yet, at the same moment, the very term 'deregulated' reminds us of the double bind of the post-Fordist predicament. Only the deregulated stand a chance of imagining an 'outside', but while doing so they embrace a precariousness that makes them ever more reliant on, or at least at the mercy of, centralised, regulated systems. This is the paradox at the heart of the endeavour of self-organisation: in its truest form it is not only non-commercial but actively anti-profit in capitalist terms, and as such intensely incompatible with the current context of a growing cultural economy and move to immaterial labour.

Davies, Dillemath and Jakobsen note this incompatibility and deal with it head on by entirely discounting the possibility of constructive work in any relation to the current seat of power, be that through diversifying the scope of the institutional frame or critiquing this frame from the inside. Instead they repeatedly argue for self-organisation as the tool for creating an 'outside' position: not as an alternative but as a successor to the institutional and commercial. This impresses, but also proves disingenuous. For both the brilliance and weakness of their text lies in its side-stepping of the paradoxical position of self-organised structures in the present moment, with their predicament of representing a phantom alternative to the all-encompassing effects of capital, while demanding

things in order' with its administrative and systematic connotations, and of the 'group engaged in a common endeavour' with its suggestion of agreed aims and goals. We need to have the courage to stop organising things and to see what emerges, and the first step in this process for freelancers is to stop shoring up our craft in a rational and managerial way and to consider our own contribution to the institutional sector (whether state or self-organised) as exemplary of a different mode of production – which I will call de-organisation. To imagine the characteristics of this approach at the current time is difficult, because unlike other takes on organisation, it argues for the production of less rather than more. Less organisation for sure, but also less of everything else: less doing, less talking, less making, less thinking. De-organisation begins with switching off the overheated machine and relaxing to the sound of the decreasing hum as it slowly grinds to a halt. In the silence that follows, faith in the de-organised approach involves embracing those 'indefinably valuable qualities' latent within the process of working together on our culture that were mentioned before. We need to develop a sensibility and patience in the face of these abstract qualities, listen to them and let them guide our actions. It is only at this level that 'more' comes in: de-organisation involves more waiting.

(4)

To recap, any debate on whether the self-organised has become synonymous with the institutional cannot help but recognise the history of differentiation and antagonism between the two sides. This can be observed, as a fairly simple 'us' and 'them' logic based on who the 'selves' are, coupled with a ground-level incompatibility in relation to an idea of how power should be distributed. It is in this sense that the term self-organisation has become a rallying call for anti-institutional projects, often with little analysis of whether any real, operational differences exist between the structures developed by artists and those developed by the state or the market. In their rejection of institutions whose compulsion to 'represent' has effectively hollowed out their purpose, Davies, Dillemut and Jakobsen intelligently point out the poverty of ambition of these spaces where our culture is essentially sold back to us in a 'lite' form. Their critique raises the question of what form or non-form we might find for initiatives that genuinely refuse to represent, avoid filling precon-

ceived roles and refrain from standing in for any prescribed sets of social relations. Despite hankering after an 'organised' solution, the authors also point to the possibility that what they are trying to promote may be more 'spirit' than 'structure'. '[...] a tool that doesn't require a cohesive identity or voice to enter into negotiation with others. It may reside within social forms but doesn't need to take on an identifiable social form itself.'

What they appear to be alluding to is a power that is distributed and ambient, alive within forms, rather than busy authoring them, and, due to its heterogeneous and continually changing character, irreducible to any singular agreed upon statement of identity. Here is the germ of de-organisation in their imagined future, a subtle suggestion of what might arise from the dissolution of organisational hegemony, which appears at odds to their wish to 'take control'. In place of the organised it evokes a moment of trust in the ongoing life of something, without assuming responsibility for its planning. This also points to one aspect of the term self-organisation that is frequently overlooked in the arts and that complicates any overly simplistic reading of it as a tool for self-determination among artists. This is not the simple idea that artists can 'do it themselves', but instead, the more abstract idea that, left to their own devices, structures, including culture, may begin to organise themselves. To explain what this might entail, the definition of self-organisation used in the natural sciences is useful. In those fields the term describes the way in which particular natural systems have a tendency to develop, and take new and more complex forms, in a seemingly unplanned fashion, without the influence of an external or central authority. In such cases, changes in the nature of the whole system occur on account of numerous actions at a low level, with the smallest parts interacting locally without the need of an overall view of the whole. This is what scientists who analyse systems have come to call 'emergence'.

It may appear dilettantish to suggest that we should communally place more trust in the intangible and unfathomable aspects of 'how things come to be'. Practically speaking it would be, in so far that these are things that we cannot preconceive, which therefore lie outside the realm of the organised. But, meditations of this kind are important, because, on the face of it, the cult of professionalisation and the resulting equations of better organisation, quality and transparency have had an increasingly stultifying effect on our museums and academies in recent years. This is having the same effect as excessive performance feedback and employee monitoring in business and our own stress-inducing

predilection to remotely steer all aspects of our lives from our laptops and iPhones. Even if I am inclined to worry about a future art world that is self-organised by the likes of Davies, Dillemath and Jakobsen, in which I am quite sure I would be led to the guillotine for my long years of collusion with the enemy, I have to agree in part with their diagnosis of today's institutions: most are 'failing in their task'. But, the truth of the matter is that there is simply no time or space in our organised lives to look again at what this task might be, or ask sensibly whether cultural work is really about tasks at all. Equally, it is time to face the fact that there is no neoliberal bogeyman forcing us to do things this way and no cabal to overthrow. In fact, if we draw from a comparison of the institution, the organisation and the individual today, we see, more disturbingly, that we are doing this to ourselves; we are willingly ushering in an era of self-imposed micro-management that borders on the institutionalisation of the self. Maybe, in the spirit of dilettantism, it is time to reassess the benefits of a life less organised.

THERE IS NO ALTERNATIVE: THE FUTURE IS (SELF-) ORGANISED PART 2

Anthony Davies, Stephan Dillemath
& Jakob Jakobsen

Reclaiming Self-Organisation

Part one of our text, 'There is No Alternative: THE FUTURE IS SELF-ORGANISED' (TINA1), was first published in 2005, a period when the 'animal spirits' of unlimited accumulation were still drunk on their own sense of infallibility. At the time, we couldn't fail to notice a similar over-confidence and arrogance in the attitude of the political, managerial and professional classes that were moving deeper into cultural and educational institutions.

We therefore felt unsure about accepting an invitation to speculate on self-organisation by an institutional commissioning body that had only recently staked a claim in this tendency and its discourse. The organisation in question, the Nordic Institute For Contemporary Arts (NIFCA) had itself become vulnerable when the progressive programming for which it had become internationally renowned fell out of sync with the increasingly localised and insular interests of its political backers. Without broader consultation it was closed in 2006 – its funds redirected to a more 'manageable' organisation without significant public opposition or protest.

In TINA1 we sought to rethink self-organisation, a term that had gained currency as a means to disguise organisational restructuring, manage critique and enhance professional careers. The text sought to place self-organisation back within its oppositional and revolutionary vocabulary, also setting it off against 'self-help' and 'self-enterprise', terms with which self-organisation had become confused and whose tendency was to stabilise and extend rather than challenge institutional hegemony.

That was 2005 – a world away – before the systemic contradictions started to become more pronounced and exploded with such frequency, and with such blinding force and violence, that the animal spirits faded, the image of eternal growth was shattered and, for most, the ruins beckoned.

The Coming Resurrection

In the midst of a period of intense struggle, violence and social upheaval, who needs economists and pundits to remind us that this is the worst financial crisis since the last? As bad as the 1990s, 1980s, 1970s, the late 1920s? Isn't the evidence all around us all the time? In the intensities of labour struggle and workers' suicides in China and South East

Asia, the further dispossession of the poor in the US, or the punishing effects of austerity measures imposed everywhere, particularly in those neoliberal European economies once regarded as exemplary, like Greece, Italy and Spain.

For decades, the catastrophic consequences we now find ourselves living through were deferred by fostering rapid market expansion and contraction, boom and bust. Here, crisis played an integral part in the seductive, syncopated rhythm of 'creative destruction'. Bust was deferred by selling it as boom – which no doubt displayed a certain creativity. A formula of almost redemptive proportions was devised to cover up the wreckage while the supposed necessity of uninhibited free market expansion could be relied upon to sanction even the most blatant acts of global plunder. In tandem, novel ways of shifting, shunting, bundling and repackaging otherwise problematic phenomena, allowed *everything* – even debt and poverty – to continue to serve capitalist accumulation.

An early response to the financial collapse of 2008 was the slogan 'We won't pay for their crisis', which later gave way to the more trenchant statement 'Capitalism is Crisis'. This underlined the realisation that the most vulnerable are not only paying a high price for the crisis, but that crisis is implicit in a system where such violence, such destruction is part and parcel of its reproduction. A distinction must here be made between economic and ideological crisis. The former is integral to the logic of capitalist accumulation, which in its neoliberal mode has contended that 'free' markets have a tendency towards self-regulation and can therefore construe crises as a temporary manifestation of that principle. The latter is a consequence of the former; a rupture in the *belief* in capitalism compounded by deep social crisis. The more established middle classes, for example, have been thrown into self-doubt, having lost their sense of global hegemony and the material securities they took for granted for decades. The world's poor, meanwhile, are, as ever, pushed further down into the mud.

It is this congruence of the economic *and* ideological crisis, which has exacerbated misery everywhere – and, with it, conjured potentially revolutionary forces now appearing on the surface. As the ranks of the newly immiserated and proletarianised continue to swell, the former middle classes now sit cheek by jowl with those whose hopes of escape they may have once embodied.

But could it be said that this re-composition is part of a more generalised revolutionary process? What we see instead is that the coming resurrections of zombie tendencies are already fully compliant with capitalist logic: nationalism, populism, xenophobia and an obsession with security – to be flanked by propaganda, surveillance, dictatorial, and/or mafia type structures.

Disciplinary austerity is presented as a necessary corrective, an emergency response to the economic crisis and global market crash. Should that fail to convince, there's always the tale of 'public sector over-spending' and 'living it large' – a popular profligacy to justify the collective sacrifice. After all, 'we're all in this together'. These narratives are typical of capitalism's meagre offering of legitimating excuses.

Under the Wheels

In recent decades we have seen a very close integration of market dynamics and culture. We have witnessed the rise and rise of the Creative Industries. These promised the liberation of Marx's alienated workers in a process of creative self-realisation and autonomy. Through creativity of the hands and the hearts, they would grant capitalism a human face. Artists, with their idealism, flexibility and enthusiasm to work even under precarious circumstances, became the role model for a new concept of capitalism, leading its 'triumphant procession around the globe'. The hopes for this spectacle were twofold: it would strengthen belief in capitalism's new formula, and it would disguise the fact that, like so much else wealth generated under the sign of creativity, it was the product of a proliferation of speculation, and increasing indebtedness. Meanwhile, under the procession's grinding wheels, the sweatshops, child labour, privatisation of commons and all other disasters that accompany the economic warfare of rich versus poor, continued unabated.

As workers in the cultural and educational sector we have to acknowledge that what passes for critique and politicisation, particularly within the contemporary art community, has proven to be even more toothless than feared. Mimicking the strategies of corporate management, art institutions adopted the rhetoric of social responsibility and ethical governance as a means to appear progressive. Under the guise of art trends like relational aesthetics and the new institutionalism, and state agendas like social inclusion, the privileged continued their merry dance.

Political agendas were de-politicised, struggle was taken out of politics as glamorous institutions dressed up as community centres, and corporations as charities. While this may not have entirely convinced the progressives and radical reformists, they still singularly failed to expose a deeper process of de-structuring, organisational hollowing out and the consolidation of existing power relations.

With the recent economic collapse, and the ideological crisis of capitalism, the more progressive branches of the cultural institutional landscape entered a void, displaying both panic and paralysis. In some cases institutional surfaces became more porous and open, while in others they congealed and contracted further, becoming ever more rigid and conservative. At the height of the Occupy Wall Street movement, New York's Artist's Space, for example, demonstrated how both processes can occur simultaneously. Here, management initially supported its own 'occupation' by artist-activists. But the progressive dream scenario of participation 'from below' suddenly turned undesirable, when 'lack of clear demands' was cited as cause to call security and remove the occupiers from the building.

In 2008, similar institutional confusion and violence marked the 28th São Paulo Biennial, where the ground floor of the massive exhibition complex was left open 'for the community'. When urban graffiti crew, *pixadores*, entered the space with their spray cans, as might be expected, they were forcibly evicted by security and police. This was not the right kind of 'participation'. Students of Berkeley University occupying Wheeler Hall in 2010 fared no better: faced with nothing more than a sit-down protest, Administration called the UC Berkeley police, which used pepper spray to drive the students from their institutional home violently.

Where antagonisms are not successfully negotiated or suppressed, institutions tend to lay low – either reproducing the state narrative that the crisis is an anomaly that can be overcome, or quietly scrambling for ways not to be cut or shut.

If we can be sure of anything at this moment, it is this: there will be no bailout for us. In fact, it is much worse – communities, homes, workplaces and organisations have again been called upon to facilitate the next phase of capitalist development. The question is: what are we going to do about it? Which is only interesting insofar as it could equally

be, what can we do about it? That is, while we remain subject to a system geared towards squeezing cash even out of the rubble it generates, the task, as we see it, is to remind ourselves that this rubble might offer a relative but significant opening: namely an awakening sense that there is no neoliberal future to build, and that we're no longer compelled to compete as individuals for a piece of the free market world. Against this backdrop, we can measure those in the art system as it stands and by what it is they have to offer in the preparation of a post-capitalist society.

Race to the Bottom

It remains urgent to examine how institutions learnt to simultaneously demand their subjects (workers, students, consumers) accept less (wages, resources, support) while having to pay more (fees, free and voluntary labour). This would include the intensification of 'hollowing out', where institutions outsourced large swathes of their activity bar the baseline cultural programming, which continued to legitimise their existence. And, more recently, the rhetoric of 'de-institutionalisation', which, removed from its original context of mental health and community care, gained some currency among art professionals as part of a pragmatic institutional response to austerity agendas.

The bogus consultative mode associated with this discourse is now widespread, demonstrating that an increased 'openness' to exterior (and critical) forces can alleviate the immediate impact of dwindling funds and gaps in programming by effectively securing free input into everything, from content to strategic organisational development. By way of illustration, London's ICA, on the verge of collapse in late 2009, gathered representatives from the 'critical art community' for an invitation-only discussion forum, The Reading Group. Its framing questions, albeit generalised, clearly also possess a strategic function: 'What work can we do?', 'How do we find alternative ways of thinking about production and labour?' and 'How can we act collectively?'

How, then, do we begin to relate the material impact of the 'race to the bottom', which can be seen everywhere - all competing against all, all the time - with what appears to be a personal and simultaneously institutional need for, and indeed desire to, cooperate, work together, self-organise? To counter this apparently unassailable dynamic, we must continue to define the system's key characteristics and patterns, especially

as these develop and change. Do we have any choice but to ally ourselves with the explosive rage this has triggered on the streets, directed so decisively at symbolic sites of knowledge, wealth and power?

What role do cultural and educational institutions play during this period of rapid change? Given the current scale of cuts and devastation, these places, where some of us happen to work, study, breathe, pose an unenviable choice: do we self-organise, break the relationship, fight it out among the ruins and accelerate the process of collapse, destruction? Or do we take on more traditional forms of opposition, slow down the process in the search for a temporary haven in the violent storm? These questions follow us into the ruins, a crumbling landscape where the terms may have changed, but the struggle, which remains a class struggle, continues.

As we move into the ruins, can art production, the art system and its institutions, for example, play a part in unlearning capital? Can it feature in a more generalised process of de-education and unlearning? Can it contribute to the exit, the movement out of capitalism? Can those in the cultural and educational sector situate notions of collectivity and communism beyond the specialisation that capitalist production continues to impose? Can these struggles be connected, widened? Can they contribute to post-capitalist, de-specialised spaces, which enable cultural production and engagement in the wildest sense?

Those of us with a need to continue to self-organise will do so in relation to the specific contours and tempos of our respective struggles. Some of us self-organise because we still can, and because we have no choice, while some self-organise to survive, to resist. Self-organisation relies on a dominant form of organisation only to depart from it. Whether it's workers on the factory floor or artist-revolutionaries elsewhere, the desire to self-organise is first and foremost caught in the contradiction that it both affirms and breaks with the dominant order. If we, then, accept that self-organisation serves a specific purpose at a specific point in any given struggle, we might also ask: at what point is it possible to move beyond self-organisation? And what would this 'beyond' look like?

Into the Ruins

There is no reason to be afraid of the ruins, among which some of us now find ourselves, because they could represent the end of capitalist relations and the dissolution of its opaque administrative bodies. It's difficult to feel concerned about the ways in which the term self-organisation has been re-purposed by those who rely on its aura of radicality to prop up their ailing power. The desired outcome of self-organisation is not the affirmation of the self, the individual, the institution – it's in the negation of these relationships.

Take over the factory (again!), occupy the schools, colleges, universities, hospitals, rip up management dictats, diss reforms, take over all public transportation, dismiss self-help, head-lock entrepreneurs, outflank the bosses, cancel all dodgy contracts, drop ownership, turn over directors, managers, curators, administrators, break into their offices, liberate their 'resources'.

In all its forms, self-organisation is a basic and necessary social process that relies on an initial binding condition or problem, which is then addressed collectively. It is a collaborative tool, a means to mobilise skills, experience, support, resources and knowledge. Looking back (and forward!), we see its role in the formation of council democracies (soviets, Räte, councils), where politics developed at the level of the factory, kindergarten, neighbourhood – and people came together to organise, practically, artistically, intellectually.

But it should be noted that decision-making and debates about executive and legislative processes can produce larger, more complex structures – a union of councils. In order to gain broader impact for different experiments in self-organisation, it will eventually become imperative to join forces, organise and unite beyond various specific and singular interests.

Issue impossible demands, make no demands, say nothing, deny everything, wreck classrooms, put social knowledge to work, re-deploy those wasted years of education, construct new tools, question and undermine normalisation, tear apart populism and nationalism, take space, refuse reform, refuse negotiations, refuse explanations, no demands in their language, anti-normative, anti-hegemonic, pain in the

ass, fragile, refuse their language, scream, shout, dance, riot, smash, fuck, make noise, remain silent.

As we've seen in recent struggles, it is necessary to work against the tendency to cut off self-organised processes from a potentially revolutionary mainstream in order to gain momentum. The framework and infrastructures for such connections are everywhere, at all times. But how can they be brought together in such a way as to maintain 'difference', and allow for tensions, antagonism and disputes to be productive? In the process of its own negation, then, self-organisation should continue to question terms like consensus, alliance, solidarity and democracy.

Try out, flow, keep on, moving with others, enjoy failure, camps, communication, interaction is production, rewrite history, redefine identity, unlearn property, make demands in another language, redistribute the sensible, de-specialise, re-specialise, re-imagine the present, socialise depression, make new dictionaries, vocabularies, lexicons, indexes, catalogues, new maps.

Continuing to produce culture, despite the dominance of capital and its institutions, is not a call for a placebo utopianism, or to prepare for a separate form of life outside of production and the creation of surplus. Instead, it means testing new forms of collaboration and developing a different measure and grasp of value. Here, production embodies mutuality, togetherness, new and dynamic social relations, all of which continue to occur among the ruins, helping to accelerate the expansion of the commons and a total transformation of social relationships.

Block, parry, side-step, strike, counter, dig out, confront, tear up, get your shit together, your guts together, boycott, complete dissent, proletarian shopping, hit and run, critique, purge, find unexpected comrades, abolish, destroy money, watch the bullshit fall apart, dance among the ruins.

A key task now is to derail capitalist restructuring, continue to widen the cracks, block all attempts at reform wherever possible. We need to build, protect and defend the communes and commons that will make up post-capitalist life. As we've seen, most states and their institutions can switch into emergency mode at a moment's notice, unleashing levels of extreme violence that are commensurate only with their own

fear – not with any actually existing threat. New warfare is underway everywhere – on the Internet, in the street, private and public sphere; all are either in a state of emergency, or threatened by impending incursions. We have to maintain the alliances and continue to develop the destructive language that shapes the exit.

Merge, get organised, disorganise, flow together, join forces, exchange experiments, experiment with yourself, get rid of yourself, slowly, start synthesising, synchronising, syncopating, shaping structures, play with weapons, stray research labs, converging forms of communication and collaboration, anti-property, no-property, property-less, non-proprietary, non-patriarchal education, self-educate, co-educate, experiment, dump your expertise, experiment, no programme, force open the archives, inhabit histories, dig the bones out of the rubble, re-animate the long, long memory of political struggles, victories and defeats, activate conflicting utopias, realise oneiric knowledge.

END

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'There is No Alternative: THE FUTURE IS SELF-ORGANISED'

Part 1, June 2005, can be found here: http://societyofcontrol.com/library/culture/davies_dilleuth_jakobsen_TINA1_future_selforganised.htm.

THE INNER AND OUTER FORM OF SELF-ORGANISATION

Maibritt Borgen

Today we are witnessing a growing interest in self-organisation as a curatorial, artistic and institutional practice; a shift that the publication of this book in itself demonstrates. But what is the foundation we use when we discuss whether we are witnessing an 'institutionalisation of self-organisation'? What historical period do we assign self-organisation to, and how, if at all, do we theorise it? Is it a strategy? A mode of survival? A lived practice, best maintained in a safe exile outside any art-historical framework, or an example of collective cynical opportunism?

Self-organisation is a mode of practice and a term founded in a self-conscious narrativisation of de-central collectivity and the dissolution of modernist hierarchies. Self-organisation has around twenty years of history in the context of Denmark, where it has played a significant role in the development of contemporary art. Anthologies and exhibitions often put a global perspective on self-organisation, but having recently moved from Denmark to the United States has made me aware that self-organisation should not be talked about in global terms. Motivations, possibilities and relationships to state and authority deviate too much to allow for specific political articulations to become clear. What I propose, then, is rather to try and unravel a sort of 'micro-history' of the development of the term and practice in a Danish context; a micro-history that is in many ways representative of shifts on a global scale.

Self-organisation as a mode of practice comes accompanied by the development of self-organisation as a term, which describes a new development in collective practices from the 1990s to the present day. Here, practice grows out of discourse, and vice versa. I limit my use of the term self-organisation to the last twenty years from the belief that the collective practices prior to this period were not strictly self-organised in the way we understand the definition today. Rather than existing within a pluralistic discourse those involved then perceived themselves as posing alternatives to the hegemonic, political order.

The plurality of practices and motivations that characterises the contemporary field has created a need for a critical re-evaluation of the term. Since the 1990s, the term has moved away from the original essentialist sense of that of anti-capitalist critique. It has become intertwined with a general development in post-industrial society that has absorbed self-organisation to a state in which the term has come to include a variety of practices, ranging from exhibition collectives and social activism to Internet communities. I want to ask if we - the art historians and the cultural practitioners - in this plurality still know what

self-organisation essentially *means*? In an attempt to track this development, I will describe self-organisation and the rhetorical development of the term, how it became implemented in artistic practice, and how current shifts in practice have in turn influenced its use to a situation in which it has become necessary to speak of self-organisation as having two forms: an inner and outer one.

Self-organisation is inscribed in the model of the 'rhizome', a term used by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in their postmodern opus *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) to describe the production and movements of desire in contemporary society. The rhizome is derived from the world of botanics, and is most easily understood as a system structured like the multitude of roots in grass:

'Unlike a structure, which is defined by a set of points and positions, the rhizome is made only of lines [...] the rhizome pertains to a map [...] that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight [...] all manner of "becomings".'¹

In the rhizomatic condition, strategies, negotiations of power and relations are constantly changing. It is a structure that privileges sideways ordering and movement over centre-periphery relations, and one needs to think only of the Internet, post-industrial production and contemporary warfare to understand how this affects society. The rhizomatic world produces a myriad of small narratives, a multi-form production that influences critical artistic modes of organisation. Resistance too must become multi-form to exist in this rhizomatic society, as the agents of power constantly change, and re-negotiate their positions. Self-organisation becomes established as a term under the conditions of a rhizomatic society. The term originated in the 1970s and 1980s, when the changes of post-war society led to a rhizomatic condition, and previously solid institutions like the nuclear family and firm ideologies were shattered. It was also a time when the belief in the possibilities of collective organisation from 1968 began to vanish and change under the new neoconservative paradigm. The word itself is not confined to the art world, but describes in more general terms a

1. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Continuum, 2004, p. 21.

shift in scientific epistemology from centralist to de-centralist behaviour. It describes the patterns of closed systems and the way in which independent systems interact and produce spatial, temporal or functional structures without orders from any central governing body.⁽²⁾ These systems '[...] acquire their new structure without specific interference from the outside; i.e systems that are self-organising.'⁽³⁾

Self-organisation as a model can be used to explain behaviour in everything: from flocks of birds to traffic. When used in connection to contemporary art and cultural practice, I would claim self-organisation describes practices in which two or more individuals decide to work collectively in a temporary and flexible structure. Self-organisation surfaced as a discourse around art in the early 2000s, but is descriptive of collective practices beginning in the 1990s. These practices were organised in a way that reflected the synergetic metaphor of systems that increased in complexity and produced new knowledge 'without interference from the outside'.⁽⁴⁾ Autonomy from the governing powers of society was the goal.⁽⁵⁾ Danish artist collective N55 started out as a studio collective set up by students from the Royal Danish Art Academy in the mid-1990s. But in a short amount of time they developed into a collaborative live-work entity of four people whose lived practice experimented with modes of autonomy that would provide independence from capitalist society.

Towards the 2000s, self-organisation was on the one hand given an increasingly anti-capitalist and political dimension, propelled by the spirit of the anti-globalisation movements of the 1990s, the rise of the Internet and a new, theoretical paradigm, in which network-based action was given ever more critical weight. Working in a self-organised way was increasingly perceived as potentially the only response to a new political reality, in which multinational entities, rather than national governments, were seen as the enemies. The flexibility of self-organised practice resonated with the critical writings of philosophers such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, whose ideas of the resistance of the 'multitude' replaced older subjects such as people and class. The main claim was the need to create a new political subject, not unified in a collective subjectivity, but a collection of

2. Igor Yevin, 'The Synergetic Approach to Art Theory: Recent Investigations', in *Leonardo*, Vol. 27, No. 5; and 'Prometheus: Art, Science and Technology in the Former Soviet Union', Special Issue, October, 1994, p. 213.

3. Hermann Haken, *Information and Self-Organization - A Makroskopik Approach to Complex Systems*, Springer, (third edition) 2006.

4. Ibid.

5. Will Bradley, Mika Hannula, Cristina Ricupero and Superflex (eds.), *Self-organisation/Counter-economic Strategies*, Sternberg Press, 2006.

singularities. The goal for critical action was to take part in spontaneous protests rather than joining a political party, etcetera.

When governed by what Deleuze and Guattari call 'lines of flight', a subject is enabled to move rapidly and painlessly from one plateau to another. A constant set of negotiations is therefore inscribed in the rhizome, creating a potential for self-organisation as a form of resistance that could escape being assimilated into the centre of power. As a realisation, the term came to incorporate specifically an increasingly multi-faceted catalogue of practices, which felt united against a global network of power relations. These power relations were seen as the conglomerate of art institutions, the advertising industry, multinational corporations and the capitalisation of creativity performed by copyright law, hegemonic conceptions and all other actors that in one way or another influenced artistic practice.⁽⁶⁾ Because of this bodiless, hard to define enemy, the term was given a plurality in the following definition, put forth by Danish artist collective Superflex, one of the most high-profile Danish self-organised groups, in 2006:

'In recent years it has been used in relation to certain kinds of social groups or networks; in this context, the term does not have a strict definition, but broadly speaking it refers to groups that are independent of institutional or corporate structures, are non-hierarchical, open and operate participatory decision-making processes.'⁽⁷⁾

This definition pluralises the term because an anti-capitalist critique is embedded implicitly, but it is also characteristic of the undefineability of the term: it is easier to define what one is not, than what one essentially is.

Simultaneous to the politisation of the term, which presupposed an alignment with anti-capitalism, another historical development unfolds. In this shift, working self-organised becomes about a collective work mode indebted to spontaneity, shifting the term inclusiveness to the level of form rather than that of motivation. Curator and critic Mika Hannula characterises self-organisation as follows:

6. 'There Is No Alternative: THE FUTURE IS SELF-ORGANISED'. Available online at http://www.societyofcontrol.com/library/culture/davies_dilemuth_jskobsen_TINA1_future_selforganised.htm

7. Will Bradley et al, op. cit., p. 5.

'an abstract phenomenon ... a meeting of different, often collaborative forces, but also conflicting desires, wishes and fears ... a transaction, a kind of platform, or an intersection of flows of information, capital, attitudes, amusements.'⁸

Hannula's statement describes self-organisation as a potential, as an articulation of an undefined 'something', made possible by the open, participatory character. If this is taken as a basic definition it becomes a working method that seems to need no motivation except for the method itself. This lack of emphasis on political justification, which is prevalent in Superflex's definition, turns self-organisation into a self-sufficient working mode, and has far-reaching implications. Self-referentialism on this level suggests that self-organisation has an inherent criticality: that things are supposed to be critical because of the sheer fact that they are self-organised. A critical development that raises the need to speak of two modes of self-organisation: self-organisation as an inner and an outer form.

The term self-organisation took over from older (but still widely used today) terms to describe collective practices, primarily labels such as 'artist-run' or 'alternative'. These collective practices, which emerged in Denmark from the 1990s onwards, were started by a new generation of increasingly internationally oriented artists, who were labelled the 'International Underground'.⁹ Working as self-organised collectives became a way of separating themselves from older generations, from the a-political attitude of the 1980s and what they saw as the failure of so-called alternative practices.¹⁰ It was a change caused by primarily two motivations. First, younger artists associated themselves less with the local history of collective organisation in artistic practice, and more with international movements in art.¹¹ They also did not perceive artists as belonging to a professional class with specific demands regardless of generational divides. They did not feel that the demands and concerns of

8. Will Bradley et al, op. cit., p. 207.

9. This is described more thoroughly in writings such as Ann Lumbye Sørensen, 'Kunstbase Alfa - Den Polyfone Strategi', in Anneli Fuchs and Emma Salling, *Kunstkademiet 1754-2004, The Royal Danish Art and Architecture Academy Press, 2004*; Rune Gade and Camilla Hjalving, *Nybrud - Dansk Kunst i 1990'erne*, Aschehoug, 2006; as well as the thesis by Ida Vesterdal Jørgensen, *Den Internationale Undergrund (The International Underground)*, handed in at the Centre for Cultural Studies, Media and Communication, University of Southern Denmark, 1999.

10. Rune Gade and Camilla Hjalving, op. cit.

11. Ida Vesterdal Jørgensen, op. cit.

their generation were answered by the established structures of artistic organisation. Denmark has a long history of artists working collectively, originating in the nineteenth century with the artists' associations. For many years, these were the primary mode of organisation for young artists.¹² In the 1990s, these associations had obtained relative power on an institutional level and had themselves become gatekeepers, which made it hard for a new generation to gain influence.¹³ Because of this shift, the idea of the artist-run as a critical gesture in and of itself lost its validity. Furthermore, what challenged the idea of the artist-run was that the artists felt increasingly connected to a contemporary global generation of critics and curators, and had no intention of excluding these from being involved in their modes of organisation.¹⁴

Secondly, the idea of art providing alternatives to contemporary society in and of itself seemed increasingly impossible. The idea that art could change the world was seen as a failed, political position, primarily because it had become too close to a critique of an institution that had changed so much it could incorporate any critique. Art's emancipatory potential was as a consequence put in a state of crisis, as it was in danger of being reduced to pure gesture. The new sense of a collective work mode was intellectually indebted to changes caused by 1960s art and cultural activism, even if artists were critical of their impact. Self-organisation in the 1990s and 2000s reflected 1960s collective practices, but the artists involved believed that rather than launching a true, critical potential, many of these alternative structures had disappeared or moved to the centre of culture, and become institutions themselves. This sentiment is reflected in the words of American artist Julie Ault, who in 1996 characterises the alternative arts movement in New York as a thing of the past, confined to the years between 1965 and 1985, and its current situation as the 'disintegration - perhaps even obsolescence - of an alternative art sphere'.¹⁵

12. With *Den Frie Udstilling* [The Free Exhibition], the first artist organisation in 1851.

13. As an example, the Artist Associations have secured equal representation in several governing boards.

14. Exhibition spaces like OTTO (1997-2001) and Globe (1992-96) are good examples of this cross-professionalisation.

15. In her 2002 book *Alternative Art New York*, which builds on an exhibition she curated at The Drawing Center in New York in 1996. The exhibition was funded by the state agency NYSCA, and asked a range of artists and cultural practitioners to 'evaluate and assess the alternative arts movement'. The disillusion she felt at the time she later modified. Ault's accounting of a local New York history can be compared to a Danish context because the 1990s generation to a large degree defined itself globally. This is evident when reading artists' publications and catalogues from this period.

But what were these alternatives that were seen as failed? The rebellious decade of the 'long' 1960s in Denmark was, as elsewhere, a rich cultural period of collaborative models for work, new cross-genres, and initiatives that breached the line between artistic and social practice. The early 1960s paved the way for preoccupation with new forms, internationalisation and cross-disciplinary practices, and, as the decade unfolded, art gradually moved into the larger social sphere. The Experimental Art School, founded in Copenhagen in 1961, among others broke new formal grounds, and Gallery Köpcke, founded by the German artist Arthur Köpcke, attracted an international crowd of artists.⁽¹⁶⁾ Art was linked to the women's movement, not only on a larger ideological level, but with smaller, yet significant initiatives such as establishing daycare facilities at the Royal Danish Art Academy, which enabled female artists to continue working when they became mothers.⁽¹⁷⁾ Art merged with anti-Vietnam activism through street theatre and happenings, artists' working conditions were addressed and a union addressing artist' rights was formed.⁽¹⁸⁾ Solidarity practices and community engagement merged in art.⁽¹⁹⁾ Increasingly artists abandoned the art institution altogether and joined the general mix of hippies and anarchists in experiments with new ways of organising life in squats, communal living and self-organised communes.⁽²⁰⁾

All these were essentially 'alternatives', in that they saw the institutions of society as functioning in one way, and themselves focusing in another. The people involved felt that their own micro-gestures had potential for addressing larger political issues, and that they encompassed a utopian element and a way of imagining a different society and another way of structuring production. They worked on two levels, which

16. The groundbreaking Fluxus Festival in the Nikolaj Church, Copenhagen, 1962, was to a large extent an international event that shocked the local audience.

Kanonklubben [The Canon Club] (1968-) started out as a camera collective among students at the Royal Danish Art Academy, named after a Canon video camera, but evolved into an autonomous department run by the students.

17. Significant events included the exhibitions 'Damebilleder' [Ladies Pictures] in 1970 and 'Kvindeudstillingen' [The Womens Exhibition] in 1975, as well as the founding of a student-run daycare facility at the Royal Danish Art Academy.

18. Billedkunstneres Forbund (BKF) [Association of Visual Artists].

19. Tøj Til Afrika (TTA) [Clothes for Africa].

20. The independent communes Project House and Christiania formed in Copenhagen. Away from the city the independent community farm Stålvængegaard, the hippie commune Det Nye Samfund [The New Society], and an alternative farm on the small island Livø were all signs of this significant new development.

informed each other: the everyday pragmatic and the ideological. And art was seen as a powerful tool for affecting change.⁽²¹⁾

The writings on self-organisation do not reflect the same beliefs. This does not mean that many self-organised initiatives, which were able to move beyond the frame of relational aesthetics, did not have a critical conscience. But they did not to the same degree fuse the everyday pragmatic with the ideological.⁽²²⁾ Instead, their belief rested on the establishing of networks, cells and the transmission of knowledge.

As the self-organised collectives abandoned the term of alternatives, the institution started paying attention. In the new millenium, global cultural institutions increasingly started to operate on market terms, and every critical gesture would fast be incorporated in the institution,⁽²³⁾ in what I would label a new 'economy of critique'.⁽²⁴⁾

As a consequence being self-organised lost its anti-institutional stance. In the words of Gilles Deleuze, we are currently living in a 'society of control' in which institutions are no longer easily perceived as buildings of brick and stone, but rather as a complex set of power relations that humans internalise and reproduce voluntarily and willingly.⁽²⁵⁾ Or, in the words of American artist and critic Andrea Fraser, who herself is considered a key character in the second wave of Institutional Critique, it is no longer possible to be anti-institutional, as the art institution is essentially everything and everyone who recognises art as art. Instead of defining themselves as alternatives to established institutions, then, the new social practices took a different path in defining a critical position, such as when Danish collective N55 tried to establish the political responsibility of the artist with the statement that 'art is about meaningful relations between things and their surrounding world', which emphasises art's engagement in a physical reality, and thereby in the world.

21. In 1975, the later professor at the Danish Art Academy Albert Merz wrote about The Womens Exhibition at Charlottenborg, that the exhibition was based on a 'human case we are all involved in'.

22. Claire Bishop has been one of the foremost critics of relational aesthetics, especially in her paper 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', *October*, No. 110, Autumn 2004, pp. 51-79.

23. One sees this very explicitly in a project like Copenhagen Free University founded in 2001.

24. In 2006 Danish artist and founder of Copenhagen Free University, Jakob Jakobsen along with German artist Stephan Dilleuth and English cultural activist Anthony Davies, all with a long track record in critical, cultural practice, sent out the manifesto 'There Is No Alternative: THE FUTURE IS SELF-ORGANISED', in which they pleaded for 'reducing uncertainty' and self-organisation.

25. As Gilles Deleuze described in his text 'Post-script on the Societies of Control', printed in the Danish artist magazine *Åndindustri* [Spirit Industry] in 1992.

Self-Organisation as Outer Form

After the 1990s and the subsequent boom in the contemporary art market, self-organisation in many ways became a model of working, and a training ground for young artists within the Danish art world.⁽²⁶⁾ It became an *outer form*, not an *inner necessity*, through which the artists envisaged themselves as agents for change in society. Today, art has moved even further from a place in the margins or in opposition to society to a place in the centre of what society desires. In the words of Danish art critic Lars Bang Larsen: it has even become a powerful force for creating desires in society.⁽²⁷⁾ This already began in the mid-1990s, when artists were seen as contributors to the GNP in a new creative economy and the visual art were seen as a powerful tool for national branding.⁽²⁸⁾ This perception was helped by two doomsday bibles Larsen also singles out: Pine and Gilmore's *The Experience Economy* (1998) and Richard Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002). State support fast picked up, incorporating neoconservative strategies into criteria for funding.

Self-organisation shares many features with the contemporary labour market, in which features such as flexibility, dedication and creativity are increasingly sought after. Self-organisation today in many ways connotes the perfect worker, and within the visual arts we are increasingly faced with a new 'economy of critique', that can turn the self-organised into profit. Self-organisation became what the system wanted, in many ways, and today it has become an established mode of practice within cultural institutions at large – a change that is illustrated by an ever-increasing list of symposiums, panels, talks and 'critical interventions'. All these events simultaneously operate in a self-organised way within an institutional discourse and thus give critical legitimacy to the institution. The success or failure of these must thereby be judged by their mode of interaction and their level of self-critique and consciousness.

This historical move is the determining factor for what I choose to label as a situation in which we now have self-organisation as outer form. The groups and collectives that work 'self-organised' today are

26. Tom Jørgensen, 'At løfte i flok' [Sharing the task], in *Kunstavisen*, No. 10, November/December 2005; Ida Vesterdal Jørgensen, op cit.

27. In his publication *Art is Norm*, Jutland Art Academy, 2009.

28. The Danish Minister of Culture referred to this in her speech for the students at the Royal Danish Art Academy in 1995, and several reports published by the Ministry of Culture analyse how art and business can work together.

many. They range from those practices that most think of as being self-organised – theoretically founded or critical public and local practices that aim to engage with the role of the artist in society – but increasingly also encompass a range of exhibition collectives, which seems to aim equally for a share of the market and for a critical point. The term also includes essentially web-based artist communities and practices that exist in close relation to the market. In their anthology, Superflex ascribe artistic self-organisation to a global catalogue of resistance practices: from cooperative factories in Argentina to Superflex's own projects such as the open licence softdrink Guarana Power.⁽²⁹⁾ But it is not a given that self-organisation has a critical autonomous position. Rather, the task must be to engage with the plurality the term now contains and use this to re-locate and re-define their criticality.

A Critical Agonism

Contemporary western capitalism is failing rapidly as any look at the news on the current recession and the Euro crisis will demonstrate. The Occupy movement is growing stronger, even under pressure, as is a widespread call for civil disobedience against the greed of the financial sector. Under neo-liberalism, artists' organisations were haunted by a sense that every critique could be incorporated, and that the only way to react was to not react. Still, the lines of flight we inhabit in a rhizomatic world are tools for an extreme speed and flexibility, and inherent in this flexibility lies also the possibility to rethink political change. The idea of rooting contemporary art practice in a world view in which one does not accept the institutional norm can – in a positive way – be to refuse its claim to power, but – in a negative way – it might as well not be addressing the power relations in which it is inscribed. There has been much critique of the varied forms of resistance that came up in the early twenty-first century. One valid point was that it was merely creating its own, counter-cultural market and not challenging established structures. At the fore of these critiques was the claim that a new generation of activists lacks the desire to work for long-time political change within the political system

29. See www.superflex.org.

of parliamentary society, or that they simply do not think in terms of systemic change altogether.⁽³⁰⁾

Self-organisation is a notion that describes an independent reaction in complex systems, but the total decentralisation of these systems is not necessarily a given. Traffic flows according to a system of roads. Workers organise according to a larger scale of production. We must reclaim this long-term pragmatic political goal, and we need to figure out a way to move 'tactically' in the world, in the sense of how Michel de Certeau saw everyday life as a site for subversive practices. We must re-acknowledge the dominant structures of the art world, however they seem to have changed, and question the foundations for our institutions and how we work within them. Challenge, not exile, is the answer to creating a new political reality.

Following on from this, the increasing individualism of our times is often regarded as a threat to critical practice. In her 2010 article 'FREE' in e-flux journal, Irit Rogoff concluded that there might also be a potential in this singularity:

'Singularity provides us with another model of thinking relationality, not as external but as loyal to a logic of its own self-organisation. Self-organisation links outwardly not as identity, interest or affiliation, but as a mode of coexistence in space. To think knowledge as the working of singularity is actually to decouple it from the operational demands put on it, to open it up to processes of multiplication and of links to alternate and unexpected entities, to animate it through something other than critique or defiance.'

Along the same lines, Belgian philosopher Chantal Mouffe advocates that we need to re-animate the political sphere through plurality. To her, plurality is the foundation for a critical, political sphere, and this becomes possible when we recognise our political opponents. Very often self-organisation is characterised by what it is not; anti-capitalistic, anti-hierarchical etcetera, and I wish to speak against setting up these binaries. Mouffe advocates for an 'agonistic' democracy, in which political enemies are not seen as adversaries, but as equal political partners. She provides a framework for a political sphere that takes pluralism and

30. A development described by, among others, Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter in *Nation of Rebels: Why Counter-Culture Became Consumer Culture*, Harper Business, 2004.

mutual recognition of opponents as its foundation, a foundation we utilise, and through the rhizomatic create new political demands.

What I have been hinting at throughout this text is the fact that along the lines of self-organisation as a practice, a split has occurred in the term: a split that makes it problematic to engage with self-organisation in an institutional context. That self-organisation today takes on an *inner* as well as an *outer* form, and rather than being institutionalised, it is now being aestheticised.

It is not unexpected that there is a return to the self-organised within the visual arts and cultural production in the current precarious situation. Art is, as always, a reflection of its sociopolitical reality. Self-organisation in an artistic and critical practice is born out of a globalised and subsequently pluralistic position, and the current political situation in many ways calls for a return to older notions of collectivity. But if collectivity is only returned to as a nostalgic model, it will omit critical reflection on its own condition. Maybe we need to embrace, rather than deny, our current individualism. The current urgent task seems to be to fuse the prevalent individualism and identity politics with a return to modes of organisation that can promote long-term political change and go beyond the singular protests at COP 15, Wall Street, and the student protests in London. A new mode of organisation that can form a bridge between the changed conditions of the art world, the art institution and the world at large is needed. For I believe Andrea Fraser is right when she claims that we can no longer be outside the institution. Can our position on the inside then become a way of demanding a new set of ethics?

INSTITUTIONAL EXPERIMENTS BETWEEN AESTHETICS AND ACTIVISM

Jonas Ekeberg

For this anthology I was invited to re-evaluate 'new institutionalism', a concept I introduced rather offhandedly in the book with the same title in 2003. Although this is not a full historic account of the various practices and theoretical debates that surrounded the field of institutional reform in the first decade of this century, I hope to be able to discuss a few crucial issues with more distance than was possible ten years ago. Specifically, I would like to look at the way in which new institutionalism became a prism through which the difference between an open-ended, aesthetic criticality and a more specific, anti-capitalist activism became apparent. *New Institutionalism* was the first publication from the then new cultural exchange institution Office for Contemporary Art Norway (OCA), and the term was both descriptive and normative from the outset.⁽¹⁾

On the one hand it was meant to describe a number of art institutions that were, as stated in the introduction, 'adopting, or at least experimenting with, the working methods of contemporary artists and their mini or temporary institutions, especially their flexible, temporal and processual ways of working.' Several institutions were mentioned in the introduction, but the Rooseum in Malmö was seen as offering the clearest example. The director Charles Esche was quoted, saying that the Rooseum was becoming 'an active space [...] part community centre, part laboratory and part academy'.⁽²⁾ In her historical account of the Rooseum, the Swedish curator Åsa Nacking describes Esche's period at the institution as follows:

'The Rooseum became a research centre for new art, where the process was made visible. In the exhibition hall studios for artists were set out, to enable the visitors to meet the artists and follow their work. An exhibition could just as well consist of the shooting of a film as of a regular screening. [...] Concerts, film screenings, talks, and performative events were integral parts of the activities, and cooperation between both regional and international groups was given priority.'⁽³⁾

On the other hand, new institutionalism was also a normative term, albeit in an ambivalent way. It carried some hope and enthusiasm for

1. Jonas Ekeberg, ed., *New Institutionalism*, Office for Contemporary Art Norway, 2003.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

3. Åsa Nacking, 'Rooseum and the condition of possibility', in Katarina Stenbeck, ed., *There's gonna be some trouble - The five year Rooseum book*, Rooseum Center for Contemporary Art, 2007, p. 21.

a renewed art institution as well as the ironical scepticism with regards to the fact that institutional critique was about to become co-opted by the institution itself, not only ideologically (as it had arguably been since the 1970s), but also practically, as a way of working.

Some commentators have proposed that new institutionalism was a Scandinavian or social democratic phenomenon, and this does perhaps hold some truth.⁽⁴⁾ In spite of the rise of neoliberalism, the welfare state grew in many northern European countries in the 1980s and 1990s. This included an increase in public spending on culture, thus forming the economic and perhaps also ideological basis for new institutionalism in northern Europe.

New institutionalism did perhaps carry the slightly romantic belief that it was possible to both deconstruct and reconstruct a public institution from within in one and the same move. However, with the toughening political climate in Europe, this basis for experiments and developments turned out to be happening in a more precarious state than previously envisioned. As social democratic Europe met the opposition of right-wing populism, many contemporary art institutions came under fire.

What's in a Name?

Already at its inception, the term 'new institutionalism' and the field of institutional reform was heavily debated. The optimistic view that contemporary art needed a new type of institution and that this new institution carried an aesthetic and a political potential, was met with the fear (or the insight) that the development of an experimental art institution would be to the disadvantage of artists. This concern was already voiced by the critic Rebecca Gordon Nesbitt in the original publication:

'One of the main pitfalls with this way of working is that artists and their activities are forced into a construct defined by the institutions that generally serves to flatter the institution and disempower the artists.'⁽⁵⁾

4. See for example Alex Farquharson, 'Bureaux de change', *Frieze*, No. 101, September 2006.

5. Rebecca Gordon Nesbitt, 'Harnessing the Means of Production', in Jonas Ekeberg, op.cit., p. 84.

Criticism was also coming from art historians, who feared that new institutionalism in its rejection of the traditional exhibition model threatened to establish a new orthodoxy. The British curator Claire Doherty feared that new institutionalism would force contemporary art into a 'social' regime:

'how to respond to artistic practice, without prescribing the outcome of engagement; how to create a programme which allows for a diversity of events, exhibitions and projects, without privileging the social over the visual?'⁽⁶⁾

However, the most crucial criticism levelled against new institutionalism came from a new generation of Marxist critics. The Austrian philosopher and art theorist Gerald Raunig stated that 'new institutionalism' sounded like 'new public management', and by extension also other such concepts linked to the neoliberal state.⁽⁷⁾ Raunig seemingly rejected the critical potential in the term and also the critical potential in the way the art institution adapted to 'the flexible, temporal and processual'. This was, on the contrary, seen as echoing that which sociologists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello had dubbed 'the new spirit of capitalism', e.g. the most sought-after resource in post-Fordist capitalism.

Even though the term might be rejected, the discussion on new institutionalism was a welcome opportunity to focus on the relation between artistic production, public institutions and social change. As an alternative, Raunig proposed the term 'instituent practices', thus linking the field of changing art institutions to social movements and activism, rather than individual artistic practices.⁽⁸⁾ Other radical curators and critics also discussed the changing field of art institutions by proposing alternative names for it: Jorge Ribalta referred to his practice at the Barcelona Museum for Contemporary Art (MACBA) as 'new institutionality', Charles Esche talked of his various projects as 'experimental institutionalism', and the artists Andrea Fraser and Hito Steyerl spoke simply of an 'institution of critique'.

6. Claire Doherty, 'The institution is dead! Long live the institution! Contemporary Art and New Institutionalism', in *engage review*, Issue 15, Summer 2004, p. 1.

7. This view was voiced by Raunig at the seminar '(Re)Staging the Art Museum' in Oslo in 2009.

8. Gerald Raunig, 'Instituent Practices - Fleeing, Instituting, Transforming', in *Transversal - Multilingual Web Journal*, No. 1, 2006, <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0106/raunig/en>.

This multitude of descriptive terms certainly signalled that new sites of cultural production had emerged and that it was imperative to discuss potentials and pitfalls. However, it also highlighted a significant opposition between aesthetic and activist positions in contemporary art theory.

Out of the 1990s

A history of institutional and museological experiments could start with the Salon des Refusés in the nineteenth century, but significant reform from *within* an art institution was probably first carried out by Alexander Dorner, director of the Landesmuseum in Hannover in the 1920s and 1930s. His radical exhibition policy – juxtaposing art with other objects of different periods – put him in direct opposition to the Nazi party.⁽⁹⁾ However, the specific roots of new institutionalism as I discuss it here probably dates back to the 1990s. If we look at the Nordic countries specifically, there was a great dissatisfaction with the art institution among young artists in this decade, and as the neo-conceptual and social art practices of that generation started to be recognised by critics and collectors, the museums and art centres necessarily had to follow suit. The Louisiana Museum for Modern Art outside Copenhagen mounted the exhibition 'NowHere' in 1996, in which the figure of the international curator was fronted in a way that had not been customary in the Nordic countries until then. The Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art (NIFCA) hosted the seminar 'Stopping the Process' in 1997, asking international curators to stop for a moment to reflect upon 'the strategies and tactics of contemporary exhibition-making'.⁽¹⁰⁾ Many others could be mentioned, and institutions like Witte de With in Rotterdam and KunstWerke in Berlin both adopted the rhetoric of the 'laboratory' (KunstWerke) and the 'experimental and flexible' (Witte de With) in the early 1990s. However, it was not until the turn of the century with institutions such as the Rooseum in Malmö (directed by Charles Esche between 2000 and 2004), the Palais de Tokyo in Paris (co-directed by Nicolas Bourriaud and Jérôme Sans between 2002 and 2004) and the

9. See for example the Dictionary of Art Historians, <http://www.dictionaryofarthistorians.org/dornera.htm>.

10. Maaretta Jaukkuri and Anders Kreuger, 'Foreword' to Mika Hannula, ed., *Stopping the Process – Contemporary views on art and exhibition*, NIFCA, 1998.

Kunstverein München (directed by Maria Lind between 2001 and 2004) that this impulse formed into a more coherent cultural movement.

The political component of this movement, at least in many of its early configurations, can easily be located in the 'relational' and subversive 1990s, what has also been dubbed the 'post-ideological' decade. The French curator Nicolas Bourriaud has been named the ideologist of this decade, and even if he is more concerned with the work of art than the institution of art in his much-referenced book *Relational Aesthetics*, the field of new institutionalism fits his description of contemporary art perfectly:

'[...] it is no longer possible to regard the contemporary work as a space to be walked through [...] It is henceforth presented as a period of time to be lived through, like an opening to unlimited discussion.'⁽¹¹⁾

Bourriaud linked relational art to urbanism, leaving its political outcome open:

'Art is the place that produces a specific sociability. It remains to be seen what the status of this is in the set of 'states of encounter' proposed by the City. How is an art focused on the production of such forms of conviviality capable of re-launching the modern emancipation plan, by complementing it? How does it permit the development of new political and cultural designs?'⁽¹²⁾

Bourriaud does envision a resistance to capitalism and consumption, but he arrives at this political stance through an aesthetic argument revolving around the way art produces forms of sociability that question capitalist consumption.

Another crucial aspect of such an 'aesthetic institutionalism' is highlighted in Swedish curator Maria Lind's title of the essay 'Learning from art and artists'. Here, Lind describes various mobile and experimental projects for the Moderna Museet in Stockholm in the late 1990s, confirming that the aesthetically attuned curator will always put artistic practice first. The result is a position characterised by openness and ambiguity:

11. Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, les presses du réel, 2002 (1998), p. 16.

12. Ibid., p. 15.

'Contemporary work [...] is about scepticism and enthusiasm, affirmation and critique at the same time. While the older generation "broke the ice", so to speak, with its confrontational polemic stance, today it is easier to be more nuanced, smart, and sensitive.'⁽¹³⁾

This was written in the year 2000 and marks the turn of the century in more than one way. The projects Lind looks back on are from the late 1990, and her talk of 'affirmation and critique' also seems to belong to the previous decade. Only a year later, Charles Esche brings a new political dimension to the discussion, as he introduces his programme for the art centre Rooseum in Malmö:

'Now, the term "art" might be starting to describe that space in society for experimentation, questioning and discovery that religion, science and philosophy have occupied sporadically in former times. It has become an active space rather than one of passive observation. Therefore the institutions to foster it have to be part-community centre, part-laboratory and part-academy, with less need for the established showroom function. They must also be political in a direct way, thinking through the consequences of our extreme free market policies.'⁽¹⁴⁾

While building on the same experimental ideas as Maria Lind does, Esche has added the crucial dimension of direct, anti-capitalist critique. Even if Esche did not mention it explicitly, this coincides with the rise of various social and counter-globalisation movements at the turn of the century as well as the ideology of the same movement as described in the seminal volume *Empire* by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, published in 2000.

NIFCA notably took a similar 'political turn' a few years later with projects such as 'Capital - It Fails Us Now' (2005), 'Populism' (2005), 'Self-organisation/counter-economic strategies' (2006) and 'Rethinking Nordic Colonialism' (2006). For a while, NIFCA carried both the formal experiments of the 1990s and the radical politics of the 2000s to such an extent that director Cecilia Gelin claimed that 'one can actually say that we are working in a utopian art institution!'⁽¹⁵⁾ However, Gelin must

13. Maria Lind, 'Learning from Art and Artists', in Brian Kuan Wood, ed., *Selected Maria Lind Writing*, Sternberg Press, 2010, p. 249.

14. Charles Esche, 'What's the Point of Institutions Like the Rooseum', in *Rooseum Provisorium*, No. 1, 2001. Quoted from Katarina Stenbeck, op. cit.

15. Cecilia Gelin, 'The Utopian Institution?', in Nina Möntmann, ed., *Art and its Institutions*, NIFCA/Black Dog Publishing, 2006, p. 6.

have been well aware of the meaning of the word 'utopia' as she went on to announce, in the next sentence, that the institution was about to be closed down. As we shall see, this was a deeply political decision, carried out by the cultural politicians from the rising right-wing Nordic populist movement. Together with the closing down of the Rooseum a year earlier, it marks a preliminary end point for new institutionalism in the Nordic countries.

The Activist Impulse

Activism was aesthetically represented in many art exhibitions of the 1990s (often emblematically, in the form of banners), and slowly it began to inform the practice of the art institutions more directly. The Rooseum and NIFCA were two Nordic examples, but MACBA in Barcelona had developed a similar approach already since before it opened in 1995. Under the directorship of Manuel J. Borja-Villel (1998–2007), MACBA engaged closely with various local political groups. In his account of the period, curator Jorge Ribalta mentions the workshop 'The Direct Action as one of the Fine Arts' in 2000 as a starting point. He states: 'Rather than social processes being given an aesthetic makeover or deactivated, this generated a newly created collaborative space in which the Museum began to form part of social struggles.'⁽¹⁶⁾

With the phrase 'giving social processes an aesthetic makeover', Ribalta explicitly refers to Nicolas Bourriaud, and thus reinforces the opposition between an aesthetic and an activist position:

'Nicolas Bourriaud's relational aesthetics corresponds to a superficial, soft and falsely consensual conception of artistic experimentation, which is actually immobilist and regressive in that it "aestheticises" the immaterial communicative paradigm and its implicit social and creative processes, imposing an expository regime that interrupts their mobility, and freezes and makes fetishes of practices.'⁽¹⁷⁾

Bourriaud defends himself against this vigorous attack in an interview in the Swedish art magazine *Site*, where he talks about the invention

16. Jorge Ribalta, 'Experiments in a New Institutionality', in Manuel Borja-Villel et al., eds., *Relational Objects - MACBA Collection 2002-2007*, Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 2009, p. 239.

17. Ibid., p. 252.