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This PDF is an extract from **engage** publication:

- **engage** review  
Promoting greater understanding and enjoyment of the visual arts
- **Art of Encounter**
- Issue 15 – Summer 2004
- 68 pages
- ISSN 1365-9383

The original publication is available from **engage** as below, subject to stocks.

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## The institution is dead! Long live the institution! Contemporary Art and New Institutionalism

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*Word count: 3424 Pages: 9*

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New Institutionalism is the buzzword of current European curatorial discourse. A term poached from social science, it classifies effectively a field of curatorial practice, institutional reform and critical debate concerned with the transformation of art institutions from within. New Institutionalism is characterised by the rhetoric of temporary / transient encounters, states of flux and open-endedness. It embraces a dominant strand of contemporary art practice - namely that which employs dialogue and participation to produce event or process-based works rather than objects for passive consumption. New Institutionalism responds to (some might even say assimilates) the working methods of artistic practice and furthermore, artist-run initiatives, whilst maintaining a belief in the gallery, museum or arts centre, and by association their buildings, as a necessary locus of, or platform for, art.

This discourse is perhaps best exemplified by three recent European projects: *Institution 2*, an exhibition and seminar at KIASMA in Helsinki, organised by curator Jens Hoffman (notably now Director of Exhibitions at the ICA, London); *Curating with Light Luggage*, a symposium at the Kunstverein, München led by Director Maria Lind; and *Verksted # 1*, a publication by The Office for Contemporary Art, Norway.<sup>1</sup> All three are characterised by New Institutionalism's self-reflexive process, by which the role and function of the

art institution is brought into question. These dialogic projects speculate that conventional art institutional time-frames, programming and staffing structures, distribution mechanisms and marketing strategies no longer address the needs of contemporary artists or their work. Hoffman, for example, asks, 'What possibilities does an institution have in shaping an understanding of culture, art and politics? What is its impact on a local community? What does the public expect from an art institution? Why should anybody care?'<sup>2</sup>

The programmes of key organisations at the forefront of such debates (Rooseum in Malmö and Palais de Tokyo in Paris perhaps being the most visible) are characterised by social experiment. Charles Esche (formerly Director of Rooseum, and now Director of Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven) relaunched the Malmö institution in 2001 suggesting,

*'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.'*<sup>3</sup>

Could New Institutionalism mean an end to conventional programming and exhibition-making as we know it? Is there evidence of the impact of such debates within the UK, or will New Institutionalism remain the preserve of European curatorial rhetoric? Responsive programming and curating (namely that which allows new forms of artistic process and engagement to shape a programme beyond the physical limitations of a building) can already be identified across organisations here such as Whitechapel, FACT and INIVA. Their programmes are distinguished from the conventional gallery or arts centre model by an inter-disciplinary approach, often using strands to allow for particular projects and events to develop through different guises and timeframes, moving through the spaces of their buildings, online and off-site, when and where appropriate. What New Institutionalism demands, of course, is not only an integration of programming staff (across exhibitions, education, performance, talks and film), but it demands shifts in visitor behaviour back and forth between reception and participation.

If, as Esche suggests, the conventional gallery or museum is becoming a social space rather than a showroom, do we run the risk of creating a new set of conventions - the convention of role-play or prescribed participation - in a wider socio-political context of impotent democracy? And consequently, do the art institutions of the future risk becoming more frustrating, less potentially contemplative or active spaces for the visual imagination? If the exhibitions and projects, which have emerged through this discourse (particularly those in Europe) mimic the experience economy of the 'real' world, does this lead to yet more coded patterns of behaviour for visitors rather than potentially surprising or liberating points of access? It seems to me that it is at this point - in the gap between conventional exhibition-making and 'performative curating' - that we locate the dilemma of New Institutionalism: how to respond to artistic practice without prescribing the

visitors' responses, and how to create a programme which allows for a diversity of events, exhibitions and projects, without privileging the social over the visual.

New Institutionalism is careful to acknowledge that it is by no means 'new', and it is important to track its recent trajectory to understand the benefits and limitations of this discourse for curating. Its proponents recognise that it emerges from a forty-year-old institutional critique characterised by such canonical art works as Mierle Laderman Ukeles' performative washing of the steps of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum in 1973, not forgetting the work of Hans Haacke, Michael Asher or Daniel Buren. Further back still, one finds the new institutionalist hero - art historian Alexander Dorner, Director of the Landesmuseum in Hanover in the 1920s. Dorner first posited the notion of a 'museum on the move' and famously suggested, 'the new type of art institute cannot merely be an art museum as it has been until now, but no museum at all. The new type will be more like a power station, a producer of new energy.'<sup>4</sup> Without doubt, Dorner's words resonate in the rhetoric of our newly refurbished, post-industrial sites of artistic presentation and production in the UK such as BALTIC, which declared itself an 'art factory', despite (to date) the predominance of presentation spaces rather than spaces of overt active process or production.<sup>5</sup>

What distinguishes the emergent New Institutionalism in the late 1990s from the historical premise of institutional critique, however, is the convergence of three key factors: firstly, relational and/or socially-engaged practice emerge as dominant strands of mainstream contemporary visual art through theoretical discourse and social networks; secondly, cultural experience becomes recognised as a primary component of urban regeneration and the consequent influx of considerable funds for newly built spaces for contemporary art leads to a reconsideration of the role of museums and galleries. During refurbishment or planning stages, the tyranny of the building gives way to a critical questioning of the relationship between programme, commercial enterprise, production and process; thirdly and perhaps most significantly, against an increasingly ubiquitous biennale culture, a generation of nomadic curators and artists emerge through whom new experimental models of presentation are circulated and exchanged. New Institutionalism has come of age.

1997 might well be regarded as a watershed in this respect. Anthologies such as Anna Harding's *Curating: The Contemporary Art Museum and Beyond*, the seminar and subsequent publication of NIFCA's *Stopping the Process* and conferences such as 'Process and Participation: Art, Artist and Audience' at Ikon, marked out the territory for the new institutionalist debate.<sup>6</sup> That same year 'Skulptur Projekte Münster' featured a propensity of services and role plays which were to characterise biennale festivals over subsequent years. This period also saw the publication in French of Nicolas Bourriaud's influential book *Esthétique relationnelle*, just a year after his landmark exhibition *Traffic* at the Musée d'Art Contemporain in Bordeaux.<sup>7</sup> By 2000, as spaces such as Tate Modern and BALTIC were launched, curator Maria Lind was suggesting that 'In reality, an exhibition is just one way amongst many of working with and letting art exist'.<sup>8</sup>

Lind has spearheaded a more performative, authorial, curatorial position, which has become the touchstone of new institutional practice particularly in Europe, and rightly so in many ways.<sup>9</sup> At its best, where it creates points of dialogic convergence for artists and art works, it is dynamic, inclusive, experimental and responsive. But New Institutionalism and its adjunct, performative curating, is not without its pitfalls. Since the flurry of debate and activity around 1997/98, rather than a broadening and expansion of these ideas, I believe that we have seen a narrowing of the field, as issues have been rehearsed, assimilated and reiterated through a profusion of seminars and conferences involving the same voices.

Curator and critic Alex Farquharson has recently suggested that 'curators interested in dealing self-reflexively with the structures of mediation inevitably end up privileging and creating an artificial demand for art practices engaged in those same questions'.<sup>10</sup> New Institutionalism risks setting up an unnecessary polarisation between self-reflexive, open-ended practices and those works which do not subscribe to a 'post-medium' condition. This is certainly something Nicolas Bourriaud has consciously avoided, distinguishing his theoretical treatise on relational aesthetics from his programme at the Palais de Tokyo.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, as art institutions adapt to include peripatetic and participatory practices in their programmes, declaring certain exhibitions or projects to be 'socially-engaged', there may be little or no understanding of how to support the visitors' negotiation of a social space within the gallery. There may also be a disparity between interaction and participation, long understood in gallery education and live art programmes, but little understood in exhibition curating. We see this in the misreading of Bourriaud's relational aesthetics as a doctrine of New Institutionalism.

It wasn't until the translation of Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* into English in 2002, combined with the publication of his new book *Post-Production* in 2003, that his proposition of the relational gained such popularity in the UK.<sup>12</sup> What is it about Bourriaud's ideas that seem to have captured our critical imagination? What does he provide beyond a basic terminology for a relatively specific area of practice?

Bourriaud provides a theoretical framework which describes and advocates what Irit Rogoff has termed elsewhere as a 'complicit encounter' between artist and audience.<sup>13</sup> For many he *seems* to address the disparity between the art institution's function to support and promote artistic practice and its responsibility to mediate engagement with that work. But herein lies the confusion. Relational aesthetics describes art practices which employ human relations to create meaning, and often through the assimilation of existing social systems such as eating, drinking or playing. Within the UK (as the recent Interrupt symposia testified), the history of engaged practice is diverse, from Artist Placement Group, through Art for Change to PLATFORM. What distinguishes these forms of direct engagement from relational aesthetics is the collaborative nature of the work.<sup>14</sup>

Look at the distinction between *tenantspin* (described in this issue), initiated

as a 'Superchannel' by the artist group Superflex, and Rirkrit Tiravanija's *Demo Station No. 4* (described below) at Ikon earlier this year. Whilst they share a common purpose to be outwardly democratic and open-ended, *tenantspin* consciously bypasses the dichotomy of community art/gallery art by existing within an interdisciplinary online field where the project has become authored and monitored by its own participants. *Demo Station No. 4* is clearly authored by Tiravanija, set within the trajectory of his nomadic practice, and gains meaning from its location within the art institution. This is not a critique, to say one is somehow more worthy than the other, but rather a plea for a clarity around the use of the term 'engagement' and what we mean by it. I'm suggesting that 'relational' does not necessarily mean socially instrumental.

Relational aesthetics seems to posit social engagement within the mainstream international art circuit, and subsequently New Institutionalism. But what exactly does this mean for visitor experience? What is the future of exhibition-making in light of such assertions? Is there still a polarisation between relational projects promoted within exhibition programmes and socially-engaged practice largely supported through education programmes?

We can see the distinction quite clearly in the biennale - a natural home for relational practice and New Institutionalism. It bears a resemblance to a 'circus blowing through town', flouting its propensity for transient encounters. As Rebecca Gordon Nesbitt suggested in *Verksted # 1*, 'There is a certain freneticism associated with this way of working, an urge to keep moving'.<sup>15</sup> This state of flux was perhaps best exemplified in *Utopia Station* at the Venice Biennale last summer.<sup>16</sup>

*Utopia Station* was promoted as 'nothing more or nothing less than a way station, a place to stop, to look, to talk and refresh the route.'<sup>17</sup> Noticeably it shared the terminology and character of New Institutionalism. It was cumulative in process (conceived as part of a nomadic project of seminars and exhibitions), open-ended, dialogic and was marked by the rhetoric of the gift-economy and service provision. The critical response to *Utopia Station* was characterised by a suspicion that somewhere in the social space of exchange, the meaningful or effective art work was lost. If indeed it was a *Gesamtkunstwerk* within the context of Venice's own blatant consumerism, one still has to ask whether the sum of its parts amounted to a worthwhile experience for its participants/consumers and furthermore, artists. There is of course a need to adapt one's behaviour in response to an 'event-exhibition' of this kind: to linger, to participate, to consume, to listen. But as one critic suggested,

*'Perhaps it was fitting that a kind of playacting reverie enveloped the Station; or that it appeared somehow more meaningful to its actors than its audience; or even that its stated goal was simply to promote discussion. Yet despite several admirable contributions and an appealing air of optimism, the overall presentation suggested a sort of troubling solipsism couched as activism, an insider's conversation in the guise of global outreach and engagement. This feeling was hardly mitigated by an installation of such dizzying opacity that most visitors seemed less interested in the art and ideas*

than in the chic souvenir totes branded with the Station's logo and that of fashion designer Agnes B.<sup>18</sup>

It is this emphasis on role play which seems to mark out the character of the 'relational' exhibition, revealed most recently here in Tiravanija's *Demo Station No. 4*, in the Tate Modern exhibition *Common Wealth* (2003) and through a series of participatory projects such as Christine Hill's *Volksboutique* or Tatsurou Bashi's *Villa Victoria* at the Liverpool Biennial (2002). Once again the critical response to these projects and exhibitions (particularly to *Demo Station No. 4* and *Common Wealth*) was characterised by an enquiry into the true nature of the encounter.<sup>19</sup> It is the frame of the gallery, and the prescription of behaviour within it, which seems to distinguish 'role play' from 'real play'. Tiravanija invited practical demonstrations from hobbyists in calligraphy, flower arranging, chess, bonsai trimming, woodcarving and origami, and reconstructed a bar for playing pool in the gallery upstairs; Gabriel Orozco encouraged us to play ping-pong, whilst Carsten Höller provided a *Frisbee House* (2000), a tent-like structure that could be entered, through which visitors could throw frisbees to other participants in the gallery.

Clearly these works and exhibitions must be viewed within the context of the artists' own peripatetic practices which set up social situations in a diversity of contexts around the world. But the gap between the rhetoric of engagement and the actual experience of the work may make for impotent participation rather than dynamic experience. This is because the visitor's behaviour is already coded by the gallery's associated exhibition programme which demands a much more passive series of encounters. The danger is that exhibitions such as these may operate as novelty participatory experiences, rather than on their own terms.

Those institutions which seem to be balancing the visual experience with a self-reflexive programme have often developed organically from commissioning non-gallery organisations such as INIVA or FACT, or they have located themselves within a very specific social and cultural context such as Palais de Tokyo or Whitechapel. Take a look at their websites.<sup>20</sup> They are distinguished from other galleries or arts centres through their emphasis on programmes which adapt to the ways in which they work with artists. They have seasons and strands of programme, rather than distinct exhibition/live art/film programmes. They supplement staff through associates and writers-in-residence, and involve artists as advisors or 'sputniks' (Kunstverein München). They work with artists on long-term projects and use their spaces creatively, from club nights, to performances and peer critiques. Significantly, however, they have not eschewed the exhibition as a form of presentation, but rather find appropriate ways of combining conventional exhibitions with social spaces through a flexible use of their buildings or adopted venues.

As for exhibition-making, there are no models of best practice. But we might look to the Museum of Modern Art Oxford's recent opening-out of the galleries to students of the Ruskin School of Drawing and Fine Art, *I am a Curator*, a project by Per Huttner at Chisenhale Gallery, London, and *Publicness* at the ICA. The exhibition as a form still has much to offer. It

provides a space in which a coherent set of narratives, dialogues and proposals might be played out. Importantly, if New Institutionalism is to survive, the resultant programmes, events and exhibitions need to move beyond rhetoric to provide intriguing and meaningful encounters for their visitors and participants. This may mean that we have to rethink the ways in which institutions conceive, support and promote engagement. Many of its proponents argue that New Institutionalism should not become a strategy or set of rules. Rather, the legacy of this discourse may be a series of art institutions which are able to morph around artists' work, providing spaces for active participation, collaboration and contemplation, but most importantly a space for the visual imagination.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Institution 2* was a seminar and an exhibition conceived by Jens Hoffmann and organised by NIFCA, Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art in collaboration with KIASMA Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki from 3 December 2003 to 5 January 2004. The following institutions were represented: BAK basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht; Contemporary Art Center, Vilnius; Foksal Gallery Foundation, Warsaw; Index, Stockholm; Kunstverein Frankfurt, Frankfurt; Oslo Kunsthall, Oslo; Palais de Tokyo, Paris; Platform Garanti Contemporary Art Center, Istanbul; Rooseum, Malmö and Witte de With, Rotterdam. *Curating with Light Luggage* was a symposium organised by Kunstverein München from 25 to 26 October 2003, as part of the project *Telling Histories: An Archive and Three Case Studies* ([www.kunstverein-muenchen.de](http://www.kunstverein-muenchen.de)). Jonas Ekeberg (2003), *Verksted Issue # 1*, includes texts by Julia Bryan-Wilson, Eivind Furnesvik and Rebecca Gordon Nesbitt and is published by The Office for Contemporary Art Norway.

<sup>2</sup> Jens Hoffman quoted by Jonas Ekeberg in the introduction to Ekeberg (2003) op.cit., p. 2 and online at [www.oca.no/publications/newinst\\_jonas.html](http://www.oca.no/publications/newinst_jonas.html)

<sup>3</sup> See [www.projectotrama.org](http://www.projectotrama.org)

<sup>4</sup> See Cauman, S. (1958) *Living Museum: Experiences of an Art Historian* - Alexander Dorner New York: Up.

<sup>5</sup> *Baltic - The Art Factory: The Building of Baltic, the Centre for Contemporary Art*, (2002) Gateshead: Baltic.

<sup>6</sup> Harding, A. (1997), *Curating: The Contemporary Art Museum and Beyond*, London: Art & Design Profile 52, John Wiley & Sons; Hannula, M. (ed.) (1998), *Stopping the Process? Contemporary Views on Art and Exhibitions*, Helsinki: NIFCA; 'Process and Participation: Art, Artist and Audience' took place in November 1997 in Birmingham, see Doherty, C. (ed.) (1998), *Out of Here: Creative Collaborations Beyond the Gallery*, Birmingham: Ikon Gallery.

<sup>7</sup> Bourriaud, N. (1998), *Esthetique relationnelle*, Paris: les Presses du Reel (published in English 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Lind, M. 'Learning from art and artists' in G. Wade (ed.) (2000), *Curating in the 21st Century*, Walsall: New Art Gallery Walsall and The University of Wolverhampton.

<sup>9</sup> Its ubiquity is best represented by the significant archive of curatorial positions - Curating Degree Zero - see [www.curatingdegreezero.org](http://www.curatingdegreezero.org)

<sup>10</sup> I don't wish to rehearse here certain arguments already played out in the pages of *Art Monthly*, through a series of indepth and informative articles by Alex Farquharson on curatorial practice, see *Art Monthly* nos. 269, 270,

272, 2003-4.

<sup>11</sup> See 'Conversation between Nicolas Bourriaud and Claire Doherty' in Doherty, C. (ed.), *Contemporary Art: From Studio to Situation* London: Black Dog Publishing, 2004 (forthcoming).

<sup>12</sup> Bourriaud, N. (2003), *Post Production*, New York: Lukas & Sternberg.

<sup>13</sup> 'Conversation between Irit Rogoff and Catherine David', in C. Doherty (ed.) (2004), *Contemporary Art: From Studio to Situation*, London: Black Dog Publishing, forthcoming.

<sup>14</sup> See [www.interrupt-symposia.org](http://www.interrupt-symposia.org)

<sup>15</sup> Gordon Nesbitt, R. 'Harnessing the Means of Production' in Ekeberg (2003) op.cit., p. 78.

<sup>16</sup> *The Utopia Station* was curated by Molly Nesbit, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Rirkrit Tiravanija.

<sup>17</sup> *Utopia Station* press release at [www.universes-in-universe.de/car/venezia/bien50/utopia/e-press.htm](http://www.universes-in-universe.de/car/venezia/bien50/utopia/e-press.htm)

<sup>18</sup> Rothkopf, Scott, 'Pictures of an exhibition' in *Artforum*, September 2003, p. 240.

<sup>19</sup> *Common Wealth*, Tate Modern, 22 October to 28 December 2003 including work by Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla, Thomas Hirschhorn, Carsten Höller and Gabriel Orozco, curated by Jessica Morgan. See Jonathan Jones, 'I have seen the future and it bounces' in *The Guardian*, 11 November 2003 online at [www.guardian.co.uk/arts](http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts) and Peter Suchin 'Common Wealth' in *Art Monthly*, Dec-Jan 03-04, No. 272, pp. 21-22 for critical responses.

<sup>20</sup> [www.fact.co.uk](http://www.fact.co.uk) ; [www.iniva.org](http://www.iniva.org) ; [www.whitechapel.org](http://www.whitechapel.org)

<sup>21</sup> 'Show and Tell: Jens Hoffman interviewed by Polly Staple', *Frieze* online at [www.frieze.com](http://www.frieze.com)

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**engage** is grateful to the Arts Councils of England, Scotland and Wales, to the Depts of Culture and Education in England, to the British Council and the European Commission, and to the Esmée Fairbairn and Baring Foundations for ongoing support.