

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

Written in 2004 Claire Doherty's *The Institution is dead! Long live the institution! Contemporary Art and New Institutionalism* was a contribution to the then developing discourse on New Institutionalism. This essay will examine what is at stake for Doherty in New Institutionalism. Doherty charts the rise of New Institutionalism as among other things a reaction to the emergence of participatory and relational art practices as a dominant stream in contemporary art. These practises according to Doherty pose challenge to institutions as to how to exhibit in such a way without privileging the social over the visual, and also in a way that renders any participation truly meaningful and engaging. Looking at the work of Alan Dunn with *tenantspin* in detail the paper will try to unpick the problems facing institutions with regard to sharing or documenting participatory or engaged art practises. The programs of new institutions often involve collaboration between the institution and multi-disciplinary artists' collectives. One such group is 16 Beaver from New York, the essay will examine a project that they created as part of *The Interventionists* exhibition in MOMMA in 2003. Finally what seems to be lacking in Doherty's account of New Institutionalism that many of these new progressive institutions were institutions of critique, however under pressure to attract a mass public many of these institutions have changed emphasis. Looking at them from that angle the essay will look at possible models for progressive institutions that would still allow them to offer critique and allow them to develop different publics.

New Institutionalism according to Doherty classifies "a field of curatorial practise, institutional reform and critical debate concerned with the transformation of art practises from within."<sup>1</sup> Artistic practises have changed from creating objects for passive consumption such as paintings, sculptures and installations to art practises which involve dialogue and participation to create event or process based works. These artistic practices are defined as open ended art forms, meaning that the work has a structure but no defined finished product, instead it invites, encourages and is realised, by the participation of the viewer. Doherty holds that New Institutionalism is a response by galleries; museums and arts centre to the change in these artistic practises and artist run initiatives in order to keep

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<sup>1</sup> Claire Doherty, "The Institution is dead! Long live the institution! Contemporary Art and New Institutionalism" in *Engage, Art of Encounter*, issue 15, Summer 2004, 1

the said institution a relevant platform for art. This response is in many instances in the form of a discourse on the role and function of the art institution. The institutions become self-reflexive about their relationship with artists and, their role in the local community, the nature of their publics and the relationship with those publics. Doherty uses three European projects in Helsinki, Munich, and a publication by the Office for Contemporary Art in Norway as examples of this discourse<sup>2</sup>.

Social experiment is a key part of the programmes of organisations of New Institutionalism with Charles Esche redefining the parameters of art as being an active space (for experimentation, questioning and discovery) rather than a space for passive observation. According to Esche this means that the role of institutions that foster it have to change to become part-community centre , part laboratory, and part academy with less need for a show room function.<sup>3</sup> New Institutionalism has had an effect on conventional programming and exhibition making, with organisations in some organisations in the UK using models of responsive programming and curating which which allows participatory and dialogical art practises shape programmes which are beyond the physical limitations of a building. These programmes are inter-disciplinary where projects and events develop through different guises and timeframes, moving through the spaces of their buildings, offline and online when and where appropriate. These art practises demand shifts in visitor behaviour back and forth between reception and participation.<sup>4</sup>

The notion of the conventional gallery becoming a social space rather than a show room throws up a number of problematic effects for Doherty including whether new conventions of prescribed participation may be created; whether art institutions will become less potentially contemplative or active spaces for the visual imagination; the possibility that work which is heavily stage-managed to be a set of prescribed behaviours may do little to surprise, inspire or hook the visual imagination of the visitor. To Doherty the key dilemma facing New Institutionalism is how to respond to participatory artistic practises and create programmes without prescribing the visitors' response and without privileging the social

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 1

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 2

<sup>4</sup> Doherty, *The Institution is dead* , 2

over the visual.<sup>5</sup> This criticism that participatory projects in the art world can be toothless is also present in the critique of relational aesthetics by Bishop and Foster.

While New Institutionalism has its genesis in the ideas of Alexander Dornier who in the 1920s had a notion of a new institute that “will be more like a power station, a producer of new energy”<sup>6</sup>, and more recently in the Institutional critique of the 1970s, Doherty sees three key factors as being crucial to the emergence of New Institutionalism in the 1990s:- The emergence of relational and socially engaged art practises as dominant strands of mainstream art; the outcome of a surge in public funding leading to the renovating and building of cultural spaces, as a public curative and to facilitate urban regeneration, which has led to “critical questioning of the relationship between programme, commercial enterprise, production and process;”<sup>7</sup> and the notable growth in the amount of Biennales, Triennials and large scale international survey shows that have given birth to a new generation of nomadic curators who share new experimental models of presentations.<sup>8</sup> Since then many curators who made their names and developed practises outside institutions are now running serious medium sized centres for contemporary art in Europe.<sup>9</sup>

From the late nineties participatory and relational art practises were to become a feature of biennial festivals. Conferences, publications of various kinds and the publication of *Relational Aesthetics* set the scene for new institutionalist debate, and the launch of the new spaces such as Tate Modern and BALTIC were to provide new spaces. Curators such as Maria Lind who became the director of Kunstverein in Munich developed new exhibition strategies stating that we have to get used to using the words “showing” and “exhibiting” less frequently.<sup>10</sup> Doherty credits Lind with being at the forefront of a “performative, authorial, curatorial position which has become the touchstone of new institutional practice.”<sup>11</sup> However Doherty holds that while at its best new institutionalism is dynamic,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 2-3

<sup>6</sup> Ibid 3

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Alex Farquharson, “Bureaux de change”, in *Frieze*, issue 101 Sept 2006

<sup>10</sup> Alex Farquharson, “I curate you curate we curate” in *Art Monthly*, no. 269 2003, 8

<sup>11</sup> Doherty, *The Institution is dead*, 4

inclusive, experimental and responsive there are however many possible problems associated with it.

Citing Alex Farquharson who says that curators who have an interest in these practises end up privileging and creating an artificial demand for these types of practises, with Doherty adding that new institutionalism risks setting up “unnecessary polarisation between self-reflexive open ended practices and those which do not subscribe to a ‘post-medium’ condition.”<sup>12</sup> Post medium refers to works that don’t have a physical component, which exist as an outcome of interaction or as a discussion stemming from an event against those that exist as physical objects to be observed and experienced. Farquharson unfolds that point more when he muses that if performative curating developed as a response to what the first generation of relational artists were doing; it's now in danger of prescribing what the next generation does. In his view while undoubtedly there are a lot of interesting artists working this way, especially on the European mainland, the problem is that there are a far larger number of interesting artists who aren't.<sup>13</sup>

To Doherty “socially engaged” participatory projects hold many pitfalls for institutions that programme them as they often have little understanding of how to support visitors’ negotiation of social space within a gallery. Also there is a difference between interaction and participation. While Bourriard’s relational aesthetic framework is often used broadly as a doctrine of new institutionalism it should only in fact be used where art practises employ human relation to create meaning (often through existing social systems such as eating, playing). However engaged practise is very diverse and can be distinguished from relational aesthetics by the collaborative nature of the work.<sup>14</sup>

She exemplifies this point using a comparison between *tenantspin*, a ‘Superchannel’ by the artist group Superflex and *Demo Station No. 4* by Rirkrit Tiravanija. A Superchannel is a branded webcasting system with a chat-room function. FACT commissioned Superflex to pilot the first UK Superchannel in the city’s oldest tower block, Coronation Court (built 1956). The new channel webcast infrequently but created a lot of interest. It was based in the 10-storey-high block and shared a room with a hairdressing salon. FACT assisted with

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<sup>12</sup> Doherty, *The Institution is dead*

<sup>13</sup> Alex Farquharson, “Curator and Artist” in *Art Monthly*, no. 270, October 2003, 16

<sup>14</sup> Doherty, *The Institution is dead*, 4

technical training and content development. Most of the residents and participants are old age pensioners. The High Rise Tenants' Group (tenant representative body formed in 1991) agreed to adopt the project and roll it out to all of the sixty-seven city-wide tower blocks that had voted to go with *tenantspin*. The blocks had 5,227 properties and around 70% of the tenants are pensioners. Many of them first moved into the towers as young married couples in the 1960s. Most of the participants were tenants of the blocks.

*Tenantspin* relocated its studios to the new FACT centre in 2004. Tenantspin has been running for over 10 years and has created over 600 hours of Community TV programming which has been seen across the world as well as by the local community in Liverpool.<sup>15</sup> The project is authored and monitored by its own participants and facilitated by FACT. Alan Dunn describes "*tenantspin* as a project of experiences and investments, experiments and commissions, live webcasts and documentaries, elderly social housing tenants and artists, parks and arts centres, institutions and new groupings. It is also one high-profile element within FACT's Collaboration Programme. For over three years *tenantspin* has been dealing with how best to represent itself to a wider public. Over the same period FACT, and the FACT Centre, have been learning to accommodate valuable non-gallery based activity such as *tenantspin*." The FACT Centre has no dedicated workshop, education nor reading room. It has only 'public' spaces, albeit with doors, in which community groups such as the Tenantspin participants can operate. To Alan the only true means of "engaging people in an art institution was by allowing them to do things within that setting. There is no better advocate of engagement than engagement itself. With Tenantspin, genuine engagement is occurring throughout the FACT building."<sup>16</sup> Evidence of engagement can be first hand or secondary. In September 2003 tenantspin was invited by Rirkrit to present the project at one of his Demo Stations. On this occasion, at Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, there was the first hand evidence of tenantspin live presence delivering webcasts. There was also the real putting green that had been used the previous day by an invited golf instructor. The putting green became the secondary evidence (within an institution) in the sense that it is the prop or trace of an exchange or participation that has already taken place<sup>17</sup>. The experience of being part of *Demo Station* prompted Dunn to wonder whether "*Demo Stations* proof that

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<sup>15</sup> Alan Dunn, "Who Needs a Spin Doctor? Part 2" in *Engage, Art of Encounter*, issue 15, Summer 2004, 3

<sup>16</sup> Doherty, *The Institution is dead*, 5

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

an institution such as Ikon Gallery is engaging with people, or is it simply proof that an artist such as Rirkrit is.<sup>18</sup> Reflecting on ways that institutions can share or document participatory art practises advocates that the sharing of participatory art practice should be posed as an artwork or commission in itself. Otherwise it is a marketing exercise. He uses his essay which was commissioned to reflect upon some of the ways in which a project such as Tenantspin has had an impact upon an institution such as FACT as a good example of how commissioned writing can be one of the better answers to the question of how to represent engagement.<sup>19</sup> Doherty contrasts tenantspin with *Demo Station No.4* which is clearly authored by Tiravanija's, and gains meaning from his nomadic practise.<sup>20</sup>

A key argument in Doherty's essay is that the emphasis on role play is what marks out the character of the 'relational' exhibition, and raises questions about the true nature of encounters in such exhibitions. In a gallery setting with its codes and rules the response of the viewer may be prescribed in such a way which distinguishes role play from real play, thus resulting in impotent participation rather than dynamic experience. Another reason for this is that the visitors' behaviour is already coded by the passive set of encounters demanded by the gallery's exhibition program.

Successful institutions according to Doherty are institutions which balance the visual experience with a self-reflexive program.<sup>21</sup> They are involved in education in its widest sense (where learning consists of equal levels of exchanges among peer groups), they run international residency schemes for artists, curators, and critics under the same roof as their exhibition spaces their guests being active during their stay in lectures, screenings, workshops, conferences etc.<sup>22</sup> They have seasons and strands of programme rather than distinct exhibition/live/art/film programmes. Working with artists on long term projects they use their spaces creatively, and find ways of combining conventional exhibitions with social spaces through a flexible use of their buildings and adopted venues.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> Ibid

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 5

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 6

<sup>22</sup> Farquharson, *Bureaux de change*

<sup>23</sup> Doherty, *The Institution is dead*

Often collaborations between artists' collectives and interdisciplinary groups play key parts in the programmes of new institutions. One such group is 16 Beaver which is an artist community that functions as a social and collaborative space on 16 Beaver street in New York, where the group maintain an on-going platform for the presentation, production, and discussion of a variety of artistic, cultural, economic, and political projects. In 11 years of existence, they have organized 400 or so events, talks, walks, conversations, and screenings all free and open to the public. They are not funded by grants or corporate sponsorship instead using an autonomous and sustainable approach to meet costs. 16 Beaver is interested in building a public which is involved in a discussion. They seek to engage or activate a participatory public that accommodates different modes of involvement. Their space is open to everybody. They also participate in group shows and do exhibitions. Invited to participate in the *Interventionists* exhibition at Massachusetts in 2004, they agreed to participate in the same mode that they usually operate which is to organise events as a satellite in their space relating to the topic of the exhibition.<sup>24</sup> Over the course of the *Interventionists* exhibition, 16Beaver organized a series of discussions, events, readings and happenings which will attempt to outline some of the central questions that concern politically/socially engaged artists. Using the exhibition as starting point, they invited selected artists from *The Interventionists* as well as others whose work or writing they were interested in to discuss their practice, their strategies and to foreground the political, formal, theoretical questions that they were attempting to confront, provoke, or raise. The exhibition also acted as a type of provocation, formulated via a publication (at the conclusion of the exhibition) with some of the political and philosophical questions they found to be most pressing for a contemporary politicized art practice.<sup>25</sup> In addition to the discourse in their own space 16 Beaver organised an event at the museum where they invited 12 artists, writers, critics involved with 16 Beaver to give a mini presentation whose theme was Concerning the Political in Art.<sup>26</sup>

Reading the work of Nina Montmann what seems to be lacking or undervalued in the Doherty's history of New Institutionalism is the whole concept of critique. According to

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<sup>24</sup> Trude Iverson and Tone Hansen, "Collective Interest," in *Art and its Institutions: Current Conflicts, Critique and Collaborations*, Nina Montmann(ed), (London: Blackdog Publishing 2006),180-187

<sup>25</sup> 16 Beaver, *MASS MOCCA Series-The on-going conference*, accessed online at <http://www.16beavergroup.org/massmoca/> accessed on 3/1/2013

<sup>26</sup> Trude Iverson and Tone Hansen, *Collective Interest*

Montmann what Rooseum and other progressive art institutions had in common was that they were institutions of critique. Curators no longer just invited critical artists, but were themselves changing institutional structures, their hierarchies, and functions. Reacting to the current developments, “institutions of critique”, from the mid- or late-nineties onwards, employed a criticism of globalized corporate institutionalism and its consumer audience<sup>27</sup>. Many of the institutions saw their projects as logical responses to the most pressing socio-political issues of the day: the shrinking welfare state, the erosion of the social bond, the privatisation of public space, the global hegemony of neo-liberal economies. Indeed for Esche the project of new institutionalism was nothing short of resisting the totality of global capitalism.<sup>28</sup> However in a 2007 article Montmann notes that that criticality didn’t survive the corporate turn, and that many of the more progressive new institutions are undergoing serious change under pressure to transform themselves into business enterprises, tourist attractions and family friendly learning centres, with a need to attract a mass public.<sup>29</sup> However she does believe that small art institutions, because of their subversive potential, offer possibilities to escape this pressure of having to attract a mass public. By experimenting with interaction between diverse interest groups and by creating international platforms, they can break away from dominant corporate strategies and redefine their public significance. She foresees institutions such as these to be closer to research based and artistic strategies than to corporate strategies, which would produce publics no longer based on prestige, but which emerge from constant exchange among diverse interest groups.<sup>30</sup> Such an institution would have to widen its scope, consider cross-genre collaborations with established as well as alternative organizations, and initiate multi-disciplinary activities. This conceivable critical institution could, for example, take on the form of an internationally operating “organized network”, which strengthens various smaller, independent institutions and activities – be they alternative, artist-run, or research-based – and could also set up temporary platforms within bigger institutions.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Nina Montmann, *The Rise and Fall of New Institutionalism, Perspectives on a Possible Future*, August 2007, accessed online at <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0407/moentmann/en> accessed on 3/1/2013

<sup>28</sup> Alex Farquharson, “Bureaux de change”, in *Frieze*, issue 101 Sept 2006

<sup>29</sup> Montmann, *The Rise and Fall of New Institutionalism*

<sup>30</sup> Nina Montmann, “Playing the Wild Child, Art Institutions in a situation of Changed Public Interest” in *Open: Art as a Public Issue*, no. 14, 2008, 26

<sup>31</sup> Montmann, *The Rise and Fall of New Institutionalism*



Doherty's essay is a useful exploration of the concept of new institutionalism, however it gives a very sweeping general view, tries to address too many issues without actually going into any in real detail. It also fails to address the politics behind new institutionalism, and seems to be talking about the assimilation of participatory and relational art practices by big institutions and museums such as Tate. Agreeing with Doherty that new institutionalism fits better with small institutions which can locate themselves within a specific social or cultural context and can generate their own publics, this paper has explored other models for new institutions. It has also through the example of *tenantspin* looked at how participatory art practices can be facilitated, shared and documented by institutions. New institutions often collaborate with artists' collectives in their programs the paper has chosen an example of the collaboration between group 16 Beaver and MOMMA in The Interventionist exhibition as a good example of this type of collaboration.

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