

# SITUATIONS

## New Institutionalism and the Exhibition as Situation

Claire Doherty

First published in *Protections Reader* (Graz: Kunsthaus Graz, 2006)

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 the 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 comes to fruition with the publication of Nina Möntmann's edited volume *Art and its Institutions: Current Conflicts, Critique and Collaborations* (Black Dog Publishing, 2006), but its predominance can also be traced to 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 former Director Maria Lind; and *Verksted # 1* - a publication by The Office for Contemporary Art Norway.<sup>1</sup> All three were 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 organisations at the forefront of such debates (Rooseum in Malmö and Palais de Tokyo in Paris under the directorship of Nicolas Bourriaud and Jerome Sans until 2005, perhaps being the most visible) are characterised by social experiment. Charles Esche (formerly Director of Rooseum, and now Director of Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven) re-launched 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>

Esche's words echo those of Brian Holmes, who has written extensively on the emergence of the museum as "proactive laboratory of social evolution" within a context of the decline of the welfare state.<sup>4</sup> New Institutionalism emerged as a

new model for museum management and exhibition curating at a moment of increased corporatisation for the art institution wherein the public are increasingly referred to as consumers and the institution's activities are driven towards income producing targets and aligned with the interests of commercial entertainment industries. If New Institutionalism means an end to conventional programming and exhibition-making as we know it, how can that occur within an increasingly spectacularised and corporatised cultural context?

What New Institutionalism demands of course is not only different kinds of curatorial strategies and an integration of programming staff (across exhibitions, education, performance, talks and film), but also shifts in visitor behaviour back and forth between reception and participation. But if as Charles 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. Consequently, do the art institutions of the future risk becoming more alienating, 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 engagement? 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 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.

The proponents of New Institutionalism are careful to acknowledge that it is by no means 'new'. It is important to track its recent trajectory whereby institutional critique became internalised, to understand the benefits and limitations of this discourse for curating.<sup>5</sup> One might look first to 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>6</sup> Without doubt Dorner's words resonate in the rhetoric of our newly refurbished, post-industrial sites of artistic presentation and production such as BALTIC in the UK, which on opening declared itself an 'art factory', despite (to date) the predominance of presentation spaces rather than spaces of overt active process or production.<sup>7</sup>

What distinguishes the emergent New Institutionalism in the late 1990s from the historical premise of institutional critique is the convergence of three key factors: firstly, relational and/or socially-engaged practices 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, within the context of 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>8</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 capc Musée d'Art Contemporain in Bordeaux.<sup>9</sup> By 2000, as spaces such as Tate Modern and BALTIC were launched, curator Maria Lind was suggesting, 'In reality, an exhibition is just one way amongst many of working with and letting art exist'.<sup>10</sup>

Lind has spearheaded a more performative, authorial curatorial position which has become the new touchstone of new institutional practice particularly in Europe, and rightly so in many ways.<sup>11</sup> At its best (creating points of dialogic convergence for artists and art works), it is dynamic, inclusive, experimental and responsive. But New Institutionalism and (its adjunct of 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 we've 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, '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>12</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 consciously avoided, distinguishing his theoretical treatise on relational aesthetics from his programme at the Palais de Tokyo until his departure in 2005.

Furthermore, whilst art institutions attempt to adapt to incorporate 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, the implications of which are long understood in gallery education and live art programmes, but rarely

understood in exhibition curating. It is at this point that we might go beyond the rhetoric of New Institutionalism to consider the exhibition as situation with the context of the pervasive biennale culture.

We might look to the etymology of the term 'curator' and speculate that the same duty of care borne by the custodian of the collection, governs the curator of the exhibition as situation. Their responsibilities might be defined (rather schematically) as follows:

- To support the artist to produce a process, project or work that responds to the exhibition as a mutable concept, with due consideration to the context of the group dynamic; that is true to the artist's practice, but which moves beyond a replication of previous work; that eventually may also operate outside the originating context of the exhibition;
- To support and engender encounters – recruiting participants, engaging viewers, interlocutors and collaborators to experience the projects and works as autonomous significations within the logic of an exhibition; provoking opportunities for new understandings and responses to context and initiating potential outcomes beyond the event-exhibition.

The exhibition as situation necessitates engagement between artists, curators and audience and hence requires a thorough understanding of the aesthetics of engagement. One of the most useful and cogently argued new theorisations of engagement is Miwon Kwon's *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity* (MIT Press, 2002). Kwon's study is particularly pertinent for a consideration of curatorial responsibility for exhibitions which involve processes of engagement. She raises significant questions about the motivating factors for participatory projects, critiquing the essentialising of site and community in context-specific projects.

Kwon traces a genealogy of site-specificity through the 70s and 80s and suggests that, as artists and curators have become informed by a broader range of disciplines (including anthropology, sociology, literary criticism, psychology, natural and cultural histories, architecture and urbanism, political theory and philosophy), "so our understanding of site has shifted from a fixed, physical location to somewhere or something constituted through social, economic, cultural and political processes."<sup>13</sup> Given that the exhibitions to emerge through New Institutionalism are considered as points of exchange and collision, made through intersections of social, economic and political relations, it is not surprising that the predominant forms of artistic practice included are social, spatial and interdisciplinary.

Speculating on the impact of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's theories of deterritorialization and nomadism, Kwon argues that with increased pressure to conceive projects which engage locally but speak globally, comes a tendency to essentialize potential 'communities' and to confine art to a set agenda. Kwon's argument is developed through a critique of New Genre Public Art in the 1990s (in particular 'Culture in Action'), referring explicitly to Hal Foster's critical examination of the 'Artist as Ethnographer'. Foster critiques the pseudo-anthropological intent of engagements with the "ethnographic participant-observer" whereby, "the artist is typically an outsider who has the institutionally sanctioned authority to engage the locale in the production of their (self-) representation", and warns, "[such] mapping may thus confirm rather than contest the authority of mapper over site in a way that reduces the desired exchange of dialogical fieldwork".<sup>14</sup> The consideration here is not simply how the artists and curators may have delimited the participants, but also how the nature of the social interactions may have been predetermined.

Kwon's rejoinder is to suggest that community-based art might be approached as a "projective enterprise", rather than a descriptive one and that projects should "unsettle", "activate" and "raise questions".<sup>15</sup> This aesthetics of the 'wrong place' is close to the playful, psycho-geographical nature of the Situationist *dérive* and can be detected in exhibitions which consciously avoid the thematic narrative in favour of the situation such as 'Protections'. These kinds of exhibitions are characterised by interventionist gestures and shifts in the status quo, which resist the representative/illustrative tendency.

Kwon's argument has been developed recently by London-based art critic Claire Bishop who has suggested that "the social turn in contemporary art has prompted an ethical turn in art criticism". Citing Jeremy Deller and Phil Collins as exemplars, Bishop suggests,

*"The best collaborative practices of the past ten years address the contradictory pull between autonomy and social intervention, and reflect on this antinomy both in the structure of the work and in the conditions of its reception".<sup>16</sup>*

Grant H. Kester would argue that by pressing for work which resists (as Bishop suggests) "truthfulness and educational efficacy" in favour of "confronting darker, more painfully complicated considerations", we would miss the opportunity for art projects which engage in acts of solidarity. Kester argues for a dialogical or conversational art "which allows the viewer to 'speak back' to the artist in certain ways, and in which this reply becomes in effect a part of the work itself".<sup>17</sup>

Kester develops this argument and his response to Miwon Kwon's contribution in his book *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. Here Kester suggests that perhaps artists can also work from a position of solidarity rather than simply as provocateurs, and that the effectiveness of this solidarity depends on their sensitivity to local political dynamics, histories and cultures and the possibility of a sustained relationship with participants.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, as participant, viewer, collaborator and client have become key roles for the audiences of the exhibition as situation, so the nature of engagement has come under scrutiny leading to a tension between the unsettling, provocative and interventionist and the complicit, strategic and collaborative. The unravelling of this debate in recent years (complicated somewhat by a misreading of Nicolas Bourriaud's 'Relational Aesthetics' and the consequent confusion of 'relational' with 'social-engagement') has provided a platform for the critical appraisal of socially engaged and participatory artworks within the New Institutional discourse.

Consequently, curatorial initiatives which seek to engender such interactions must begin to unpack the terminologies we use to distinguish one project from each other. For example, those artists who invite participation, often through a complicit engagement with their subject, but who essentially remain the signatories of their work (Thomas Hirschhorn, Phil Collins, Santiago Sierra), from those who embed themselves within the social fabric of a city through intervention (Francis Alÿs, Minerva Cuevas, Roman Ondák), from those who work collaboratively effecting a kind of 'social sculpture' (Superflex, Wochenklasur). So, to speak of an exhibition as a 'projection' which 'oscillates between domesticity and the realm of social relations' necessitates less an unpacking of the ethics of artistic engagement than on a differentiation between types of engagement and the necessary curatorial strategies to support these divergent approaches.

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 engaged practice and New Institutionalism. It bears a resemblance to a 'circus blowing through town', flouting its propensity for transient encounters. As Rebecca Gordon Nesbitt outlined in *Verksted # 1*, 'There is a certain freneticism associated with this way of working, an urge to keep moving'.<sup>19</sup> This state of flux was perhaps best exemplified in Utopia Station at the Venice Biennale in 2003.<sup>20</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>21</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* writ large in the Arsenale against 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>22</sup>

Clearly these 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. The gaps between the conceptualisation of that situation, the rhetoric of engagement and the actual experience of the work, however, may actually open up to reveal impotent participation rather than dynamic experience. This is because the visitor's behaviour is already coded by the gallery's associate exhibition or biennale programmes which demand 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.

So how do we move beyond the rhetoric of New Institutionalism? What kinds of exhibitions will result from this discourse? Exhibition models are beginning to emerge through experimental formats such as 'Protections'. Let's hope their self-reflexive, cumulative and engaging festival format will have significant impact on the structural make-up of their institutions. Yet, the evidence so far is not good – Directors of both the Rooseum in Malmö and Kunstverein München have moved on, with their institutions unable to address the legacy of New Institutionalism, whilst the corporatisation of larger art institutions continues to mitigate against self-reflexivity and experiment. It seems perhaps that such projects may continue to remain the exception rather than the norm, best produced through the institutions' off-site programmes and for international biennales, than within the walls of the institution itself. Brian Holmes' laboratory of social evolution is some way off.

## End 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 <[http://www.oca.no/publications/newinst\\_jonas.html](http://www.oca.no/publications/newinst_jonas.html)> on 9 July 2006.

<sup>3</sup> <<http://www.proyectotrama.org>> at 9 July 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Holmes, Brian quoted in Montmann, N. (2006), *Art and its Institutions: Current Conflicts, Critique and Collaborations*, London: Black Dog Publishing.

<sup>5</sup> Fraser, A. (2003/6) "A museum is not a business. It is run in a business like fashion" in Möntmann op. cit.

<sup>6</sup> Cauman, S. (1958) *Living Museum - Experiences of an Art Historian* - Alexander Dorner, New York: Up.

<sup>7</sup> Baltic - *The Art Factory: The Building of Baltic, the Centre for Contemporary Art*, (2002) Gateshead: Baltic.

<sup>8</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>9</sup> Bourriaud, N. (1998), *Esthetique relationnelle*, Paris: les Presses du Reel (published in English 2002).

<sup>10</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>11</sup> Its ubiquity is best represented by the significant archive of curatorial positions - Curating Degree Zero - see <<http://www.curatingdegreezero.org>>.

<sup>12</sup> I don't wish to rehearse here certain arguments already played out in the pages of Art Monthly, through a series of in-depth and informative articles by Alex Farquharson and Paul O'Neill on curatorial practice, see Art Monthly nos. 269, 270, 272, 2003-4.

<sup>13</sup> Kwon, M. (2002), *One Place after Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

<sup>14</sup> Foster, H. (1996) "The Artist as Ethnographer." *The Return of the Real*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT, p. 197.

- <sup>15</sup> Kwon, M. (1998) "Public Art and Urban Identities." *Public Art Strategies: Public Art and Public Space*. Ed. Cheryl Younger. New York: New York University, p. 168.
- <sup>16</sup> Bishop, C. (2006) "The Social Turn: Collaborations and its Discontents." *Artforum* February, pp. 178-183.
- <sup>17</sup> Kester, G. H. "Dialogical Aesthetics: A Critical Framework for Littoral Art." <[http://www.variant.randomstate.org/events\\_archive.html](http://www.variant.randomstate.org/events_archive.html)>. 12 April 2006.
- <sup>18</sup> Kester, G. H. (2004) *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- <sup>19</sup> Gordon Nesbitt, R. 'Harnessing the Means of Production' in Ekeberg (2003) op.cit., p. 78.
- <sup>20</sup> *The Utopia Station* was curated by Molly Nesbit, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Rirkrit Tiravanija.
- <sup>21</sup> *Utopia Station* press release at <<http://www.universes-in-universe.de/car/venezia/bien50/utopia/e-press.htm>> at 9 July 2006.
- <sup>22</sup> Rothkopf, Scott, 'Pictures of an exhibition' in *Artforum*, September 2003, p. 240.

© Claire Doherty and Kunsthaus. Published by Situations at the University of the West of England, Bristol, 2007.

The person using this paper online may view, reproduce or store copies of this paper providing the information is only for their individual use, and is not used for commercial purposes. Any copies of this paper, in whole or in part, must include the copyright notice above and the customary bibliographic citation, including author, attribution, date, article title and the URL [www.situations.org.uk](http://www.situations.org.uk).

The views expressed in this paper are not necessarily those of the Publisher.