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Extradisciplinary Investigations. Towards a New Critique of Institutions

Towards a New Critique of Institutions

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What is the logic, the need or the desire that pushes more and more artists to work outside the limits of their own discipline, defined by the notions of free reflexivity and pure aesthetics, incarnated by the gallery-magazine-museum-collection circuit, and haunted by the memory of the normative genres, painting and sculpture?

Pop art, conceptual art, body art, performance and video each marked a rupture of the disciplinary frame, already in the 1960-70s. But one could argue that these dramatized outbursts merely *imported* themes, media or expressive techniques back into what Yves Klein had termed the "specialized" ambiance of the gallery or the museum, qualified by the primacy of the aesthetic and managed by the functionaries of art. Exactly such arguments were launched by Robert Smithson in his text on cultural confinement in 1972, then restated by Brian O'Doherty in his theses on the ideology of

the white cube.[1] They still have a lot of validity. Yet now we are confronted with a new series of outbursts, under such names as net.art, bio art, visual geography, space art and database art – to which one could add an archi-art, or art of architecture, which curiously enough has never been baptized as such, as well as a machine art that reaches all the way back to 1920s constructivism, or even a "finance art" whose birth was announced in the Casa Encendida of Madrid just last summer.

The heterogeneous character of the list immediately suggests its application to all the domains where theory and practice meet. In the artistic forms that result, one will always find remains of the old modernist tropism whereby art designates itself first of all, drawing the attention back to its own operations of expression, representation, metaphorization or deconstruction. Independently of whatever "subject" it treats, art tends to make this self-reflexivity its distinctive or identifying trait, even its *raison d'être*, in a gesture whose philosophical legitimacy was established by Kant. But in the kind of work I want to discuss, there is something more at stake.

We can approach it through the word that the Nettime project used to define its collective ambitions. For the artists, theorists, media activists and programmers who inhabited that mailing list – one of the important vectors of net.art in the late 1990s – it was a matter of proposing an "immanent critique" of the Internet, that is, of the technoscientific infrastructure then in the course of construction. This critique was to be carried out inside the network itself, using its languages and its technical tools and focusing on its characteristic objects, with the goal of influencing or even of directly shaping its development – but without refusing the possibilities of distribution outside this circuit.[2] What's sketched out is a two-way movement, which consists in occupying a field with a potential for shaking up society (telematics) and then

radiating outward from that specialized domain, with the explicitly formulated aim of effecting change in the discipline of art (considered too formalist and narcissistic to escape its own charmed circle), in the discipline of cultural critique (considered too academic and historicist to confront the current transformations) and even in the "discipline" – if you can call it that – of leftist activism (considered too doctrinaire, too ideological to seize the occasions of the present).

At work here is a new tropism and a new sort of reflexivity, involving artists as well as theorists and activists in a passage beyond the limits traditionally assigned to their practice. The word tropism conveys the desire or need to turn towards something else, towards an exterior field or discipline; while the notion of reflexivity now indicates a critical return to the departure point, an attempt to transform the initial discipline, to end its isolation, to open up new possibilities of expression, analysis, cooperation and commitment. This back-and-forth movement, or rather, this transformative spiral, is the operative principle of what I will be calling extradisciplinary investigations.

The concept was forged in an attempt to go beyond a kind of double aimlessness that affects contemporary signifying practices, even a double drift, but without the revolutionary qualities that the Situationists were looking for. I'm thinking first of the inflation of interdisciplinary discourses on the academic and cultural circuits: a virtuoso combinatory system that feeds the symbolic mill of cognitive capital, acting as a kind of supplement to the endless pinwheels of finance itself (the curator Hans-Ulrich Obrist is a specialist of these combinatories). Second is the state of indiscipline that is an unsought effect of the anti-authoritarian revolts of the 1960s, where the subject simply gives into the aesthetic solicitations of the market (in the neopop vein,

indiscipline means endlessly repeating and remixing the flux of prefabricated commercial images). Though they aren't the same, interdisciplinarity and indiscipline have become the two most common excuses for the neutralization of significant inquiry.[3] But there is no reason to accept them.

The extradisciplinary ambition is to carry out rigorous investigations on terrains as far away from art as finance, biotech, geography, urbanism, psychiatry, the electromagnetic spectrum, etc., to bring forth on those terrains the "free play of the faculties" and the intersubjective experimentation that are characteristic of modern art, but also to try to identify, inside those same domains, the spectacular or instrumental uses so often made of the subversive liberty of aesthetic play – as the architect Eyal Weizman does in exemplary fashion, when he investigates the appropriation by the Israeli and American military of what were initially conceived as subversive architectural strategies. Weizman challenges the military on its own terrain, with his maps of security infrastructures in Israel; but what he brings back are elements for a critical examination of what used to be his exclusive discipline.[4] This complex movement, which never neglects the existence of the different disciplines, but never lets itself be trapped by them either, can provide a new departure point for what used to be called *institutional critique*.

Histories in the Present

What has been established, retrospectively, as the "first generation" of institutional critique includes figures like Michael Asher, Robert Smithson, Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke and Marcel Broodthaers. They examined the conditioning of their own activity by the ideological and economic frames of the museum, with the goal of

breaking out. They had a strong relation to the anti-institutional revolts of the 1960s and 70s, and to the accompanying philosophical critiques.[5] The best way to take their specific focus on the museum is not as a self-assigned limit or a fetishization of the institution, but instead as part of a materialist praxis, lucidly aware of its context, but with wider transformatory intentions. To find out where their story leads, however, we have to look at the writing of Benjamin Buchloh and see how he framed the emergence of institutional critique.

In a text entitled "Conceptual Art 1962-1969," Buchloh quotes two key propositions by Lawrence Weiner. The first is *A Square Removed from a Rug in Use*, and the second, *A 36"x 36" Removal to the Lathing or Support Wall of Plaster or Wallboard from a Wall* (both 1968). In each it is a matter of taking the most self-referential and tautological form possible – the square, whose sides each repeat and reiterate the others – and inserting it in an environment marked by the determinisms of the social world. As Buchloh writes: *"Both interventions – while maintaining their structural and morphological links with formal traditions by respecting classical geometry… – inscribe themselves in the support surfaces of the institutions and/or the home which that tradition had always disavowed.… On the one hand, it dissipates the expectation of encountering the work of art only in a 'specialized' or 'qualified' location.… On the other, neither one of these surfaces could ever be considered to be independent from their institutional location, since the physical inscription into each particular surface inevitably generates contextual readings…"*[6]

Weiner's propositions are clearly a version of immanent critique, operating flush with the discursive and material structures of the art institutions; but they are cast as a purely logical deduction from

minimal and conceptual premises. They just as clearly prefigure the symbolic activism of Gordon Matta-Clark's "anarchitecture" works, like *Splitting* (1973) or *Window Blow-Out* (1976), which confronted the gallery space with urban inequality and racial discrimination. From that departure point, a history of artistic critique could have led to contemporary forms of activism and technopolitical research, via the mobilization of artists around the AIDS epidemic in late 1980s. But the most widespread versions of 60s and 70s cultural history never took that turn. According to the subtitle of Buchloh's famous text, the teleological movement of late-modernist art in the 1970s was heading "From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions." This would mean a strictly Frankfurtian vision of the museum as an idealizing Enlightenment institution, damaged by both the bureaucratic state and the market spectacle.

Other histories could be written. At stake is the tense double-bind between the desire to transform the specialized "cell" (as Brian O'Doherty described the modernist gallery) into a mobile potential of living knowledge that can reach out into the world, and the counter-realization that everything about this specialized aesthetic space is a trap, that it has been instituted as a form of enclosure. That tension produced the incisive interventions of Michal Asher, the sledgehammer denunciations of Hans Haacke, the paradoxical displacements of Robert Smithson, or the melancholic humor and poetic fantasy of Marcel Broodthaers, whose hidden mainspring was a youthful engagement with revolutionary surrealism. The first thing is never to reduce the diversity and complexity of artists who never voluntarily joined into a movement. Another reduction comes from the obsessive focus on a specific site of presentation, the museum, whether it is mourned as a fading relic of the "bourgeois public sphere," or exalted with a fetishizing discourse of

“site specificity.” These two pitfalls lay in wait for the discourse of institutional critique, when it took explicit form in the United States in the late 80s and early 90s.

It was the period of the so-called “second generation.” Among the names most often cited are Renee Green, Christian Philipp Müller, Fred Wilson or Andrea Fraser. They pursued the systematic exploration of museological representation, examining its links to economic power and its epistemological roots in a colonial science that treats the Other like an object to be shown in a vitrine. But they added a subjectivizing turn, unimaginable without the influence of feminism and postcolonial historiography, which allowed them to recast external power hierarchies as ambivalences within the self, opening up a conflicted sensibility to the coexistence of multiple modes and vectors of representation. There is a compelling negotiation here, particularly in the work of Renee Green, between specialized discourse analysis and embodied experimentation with the human sensorium. Yet most of this work was also carried out in the form of meta-reflections on the limits of the artistic practices themselves (mock museum displays or scripted video performances), staged within institutions that were ever-more blatantly corporate – to the point where it became increasingly hard to shield the critical investigations from their own accusations, and their own often devastating conclusions.

This situation of a critical process taking itself for its object recently led Andrea Fraser to consider the artistic institution as an unsurpassable, all-defining frame, sustained through its own inwardly directed critique.[7] Bourdieu’s deterministic analysis of the closure of the socio-professional fields, mingled with a deep confusion between Weber’s iron cage and Foucault’s desire “to get free of oneself,” is internalized here in a governmentality of failure, where the subject can do no more than contemplate his or her own

psychic prison, with a few aesthetic luxuries in compensation.[8] Unfortunately, it all adds very little to Broodthaers' lucid testament, formulated on a single page in 1975.[9] For Broodthaers, the only alternative to a guilty conscience was self-imposed blindness – not exactly a solution! Yet Fraser accepts it, by posing her argument as an attempt to "defend the very institution for which the institution of the avant-garde's 'self-criticism' had created the potential: the institution of critique."

Without any antagonistic or even agonistic relation to the status quo, and above all, without any aim to change it, what's defended becomes little more than a masochistic variation on the self-serving "institutional theory of art" promoted by Danto, Dickie and their followers (a theory of mutual and circular recognition among members of an object-oriented milieu, misleadingly called a "world"). The loop is looped, and what had been a large-scale, complex, searching and transformational project of 60s and 70s art seems to reach a dead end, with institutional consequences of complacency, immobility, loss of autonomy, capitulation before various forms of instrumentalization...

Phase Change

The end may be logical, but some desire to go much further. The first thing is to redefine the means, the media and the aims of a possible third phase of institutional critique. The notion of transversality, developed by the practitioners of institutional analysis, helps to theorize the assemblages that link actors and resources from the art circuit to projects and experiments that don't exhaust themselves inside it, but rather, extend elsewhere.[10] These projects can no longer be unambiguously defined as art. They are based instead on a circulation between disciplines, often

involving the real critical reserve of marginal or counter-cultural positions – social movements, political associations, squats, autonomous universities – which can't be reduced to an all-embracing institution.

The projects tend to be collective, even if they also tend to flee the difficulties that collectivity involves, by operating as networks. Their inventors, who came of age in the universe of cognitive capitalism, are drawn toward complex social functions which they seize upon in all their technical detail, and in full awareness that the second nature of the world is now shaped by technology and organizational form. In almost every case it is a political engagement that gives them the desire to pursue their exacting investigations beyond the limits of an artistic or academic discipline. But their analytic processes are at the same time expressive, and for them, every complex machine is awash in affect and subjectivity. It is when these subjective and analytic sides mesh closely together, in the new productive and political contexts of communicational labor (and not just in meta-reflections staged uniquely for the museum), that one can speak of a "third phase" of institutional critique – or better, of a "phase change" in what was formerly known as the public sphere, a change which has extensively transformed the contexts and modes of cultural and intellectual production in the twenty-first century.

An issue of *Multitudes*, co-edited with the *Transform* web-journal, gives examples of this approach.[11] The aim is to sketch the problematic field of an exploratory practice that is not new, but is definitely rising in urgency. Rather than offering a curatorial recipe, we wanted to cast new light on the old problems of the closure of specialized disciplines, the intellectual and affective paralysis to which it gives rise, and the alienation of any capacity for democratic decision-making that inevitably follows, particularly in a highly

complex technological society. The forms of expression, public intervention and critical reflexivity that have been developed in response to such conditions can be characterized as extradisciplinary – but without fetishizing the word at the expense of the horizon it seeks to indicate.

On considering the work, and particularly the articles dealing with technopolitical issues, some will probably wonder if it might not have been interesting to evoke the name of Bruno Latour. His ambition is that of "making things public," or more precisely, elucidating the specific encounters between complex technical objects and specific processes of decision-making (whether these are *de jure* or *de facto* political). For that, he says, one must proceed in the form of "proofs," established as rigorously as possible, but at the same time necessarily "messy," like the things of the world themselves.[12]

There is something interesting in Latour's proving machine (even if it does tend, unmistakably, toward the academic productivism of "interdisciplinarity"). A concern for how things are shaped in the present, and a desire for constructive interference in the processes and decisions that shape them, is characteristic of those who no longer dream of an absolute outside and a total, year-zero revolution. However, it's enough to consider the artists whom we invited to the *Multitudes* issue, in order to see the differences. Hard as one may try, the 1750 km Baku-Tiblisi-Ceyhan pipeline cannot be reduced to the "proof" of anything, even if Ursula Biemann did compress it into the ten distinct sections of the *Black Sea Files*.[13] Traversing Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey before it debouches in the Mediterranean, the pipeline forms the object of political decisions even while it sprawls beyond reason and imagination, engaging the whole planet in the geopolitical and ecological uncertainty of the present.

Similarly, the Paneuropean transport and communication corridors running through the former Yugoslavia, Greece and Turkey, filmed by the participants of the Timescapes group initiated by Angela Melitopoulos, result from the one of the most complex infrastructure-planning processes of our epoch, carried out at the transnational and transcontinental levels. Yet these precisely designed economic projects are at once inextricable from the conflicted memories of their historical precedents, and immediately delivered over to the multiplicity of their uses, which include the staging of massive, self-organized protests in conscious resistance to the manipulation of daily life by the corridor-planning process. Human beings do not necessarily want to be the living "proof" of an economic thesis, carried out from above with powerful and sophisticated instruments – including media devices that distort their images and their most intimate affects. An anonymous protester's insistent sign, brandished in the face of the TV cameras at the demonstrations surrounding the 2003 EU summit in Thessalonica, says it all: ANY SIMILARITY TO ACTUAL PERSONS OR EVENTS IS UNINTENTIONAL.[14]

Art history has emerged into the present, and the critique of the conditions of representation has spilled out onto the streets. But in the same movement, the streets have taken up their place in our critiques. In the philosophical essays that we included in the *Multitudes* project, *institution* and *constitution* always rhyme with *destitution*. The specific focus on extradisciplinary artistic practices does not mean radical politics has been forgotten, far from it. Today more than ever, any constructive investigation has to raise the standards of resistance.

[1] Robert Smithson, "Cultural Confinement" (1972), in Jack Flam (ed.), *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, Berkeley, U.C. Press, 1996; Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (expanded edition), Berkeley, U.C. Press, 1976/1986.

[2] See the introduction to the anthology *ReadMe!*, New York, Autonomedia, 1999. One of the best examples of immanent critique is the project "Name Space" by Paul Garrin, which aimed to rework the domain name system (DNS) which constitutes the web as a navigable space; cf. pp. 224-29.

[3] Cf. Brian Holmes, "L'extradisciplinaire," in Hans-Ulrich Obrist and Laurence Bossé (eds.), *Traversées*, cat. Musée 'art moderne de la Ville de Paris, 2001.

[4] Eyal Weizman, "Walking through Walls," at http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0507.

[5] Cf. Stefan Nowotny, "Anti-Canonization: The Differential Knowledge of Institutional Critique," http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0106/nowotny/en/#_ftn6.

[6] Benjamin Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetics of Administration to the Critique of Institutions," *October* 55 (Winter 1990).

[7] *"Just as art cannot exist outside the field of art, we cannot exist outside the field of art, at least not as artists, critics, curators, etc.… if there is no outside for us, it is not because the institution is perfectly closed, or exists as an apparatus in a 'totally administered world,' or has grown all-encompassing in size and scope. It is because the institution is inside of us, and we can't get outside of ourselves."* Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to the Institution of Critique,"

in John C. Welchman (ed.), *Institutional Critique and After*, Zurich, JRP/Ringier, 2006.

[8] Cf. Gerald Raunig, "Instituent Practices. Fleeing, Instituting, Transforming," http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0106/raunig/en.

[9] Marcel Broodthaers, "To be bien pensant... or not to be. To be blind." (1975), in *October* 42, "Marcel Broodthaers: Writings, Interviews, Photographs" (Fall 1987).

[10] Cf. Félix Guattari, *Psychanalyse et transversalité: Essais d'analyse institutionnelle* (1972), Paris, La Découverte, 2003.

[11] See "Extradisciplinaire," http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0507.

[12] Bruno Latour, Peter Weibel (eds), *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, Karlsruhe, ZKM, 2005.

[13] The video installation *Black Sea Files* by Ursula Biemann, done in the context of the Transcultural Geographies project, has been exhibited with the other works of that project at Kunst-Werke in Berlin, Dec. 15, 2005 - Feb. 26, 2006, then at Tapies Foundation in Barcelona, March 9 - May 6, 2007; published in Anselm Frank (ed. and curator), *B-Zone: Becoming Europe and Beyond*, cat., Berlin, KW/Actar, 2005.

[14] The video installation *Corridor X* by Angela Melitopoulos, with the work of the other members of Timescapes, has been exhibited and published in *B-Zone: Becoming Europe and Beyond*, op. cit.