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The Enterprise of the Art Institution in Late Capitalism

Nina Möntmann

Translated by Aileen Derieg

What is currently regarded as political in art is marked by a broad ranging discourse of critical views on globalization mechanisms, privatization and the precarization of life styles. In addition, for some time now art has shown a lively interest in political activism. Nevertheless, the most powerful and influential alliances between contemporary art and politics are not found with some kind of activist agenda in the camp of leftist politics, but rather more and more in the implementation of neoliberal political ideals as the standard of increasingly privatized art institutions. Late capitalist enterprise structures flow into the institutions' management policies and modes of working, requiring new personal qualifications and skills at the same time. Thus the director of a larger institution must demonstrate the qualities of a manager on the one hand and those of a populist politician on the other. Conversely, the constitution of the subject within the cultural field is a political process, which serves as a role model for the late capitalist enterprise culture. The assumption of precarious social situations and survival strategies such as self-management, permanent creativity, flexible and mobile lifestyles like those

practiced, more or less voluntarily, in the art field, has already taken place in the process of the development of the New Economy and is continued in the establishment of company structures and the drafting of philosophies of labor and living in the neoliberal business world.

In this current scenario, which goes hand in hand with the dismantling of the welfare state, a new orientation for emancipatory forms of action in the institutionalized art field appears to be necessary. At the same time, a fundamental question of positioning arises first of all: Is the welfare state worth defending? Or has it indeed obscured the actual forms of ownership in its practiced form by preventing that people live below minimum income and thus introducing the privatization of art institutions at the same time? Immanuel Wallerstein, for example, refers to a leftist rhetoric of revolution which says that everything that does not bring about the collapse of the dominant power system must be rejected. He maintains that a policy of small steps no longer represents a real option and argues in favor of imagining a completely renewed system to replace the obsolete ideas of democracy, which were never actually realized. In his words, democracy is to be equated with egalitarianism, and he calls for a radically egalitarian system.[1] What he sees in the Leninist system is merely an egalitarian rhetoric. Which perspectives result from this scenario? Wallerstein proposes that alliances must be found, but he also recognizes that caution is required with regard to the interests of those who want to maintain the existing power relations. Wallerstein himself does not seem to be very pessimistic about the chances of success for this approach. Rather more skepticism is certainly possible – and yet, his description of the current situation and the idea of how democratic approaches could

be structured and guided could be useful for organizing collaborative strategies in the art field.

Since the 1960s, developments in the fields of art and politics have drifted increasingly farther apart. For this reason, designing new institutions – both from the ground up and within the framework of existing institutions – that bring art and politics together is just as challenging as it is necessary. The crucial question here, though, is: Who is the new peer group for these projected institutions? With the loss of social influence on the part of the bourgeoisie, the art institution has lost its peer group and thus plummeted into a crisis of legitimization. As a project of the Enlightenment, the art institution embodied the ideals of the bourgeoisie and served the production and affirmation of aristocratic values and their ideological roots. In this way it reinforced the taste and the education of a certain, socially relevant segment of the population, providing it with a public forum, which in turn supported its own legitimacy. And those who were not part of this were to at least receive a portion of education in the art institutions.
The classic bourgeois institutional model, however, has long since been replaced by a corporative institutional logic, flexibilized working conditions, a program with event character and a populistic concept of the public sphere. Habermas' concept of a homogeneous public sphere that follows an abstract ideal and excludes, for instance, sub-cultures and countercultures, has long since been refuted by the recognition of a fragmented public sphere that is not accessible in the same way for different segments of the population. Nevertheless, the problem that arises for art institutions today is that politicians and sponsors still presume a homogeneous, populist concept of the public sphere, and the financial backers of the institutions still assign a mission to them accordingly. Consequently, the measure of their success and thus

the current legitimization of art institutions is based on visitor numbers, on sheer quantity, in other words, and therefore also on the institution being economically viable.[2]
Here the visitor is conceived as a global consumer. In his most recent book, Richard Sennett analyzes this "ideal human being" for "new capitalism" that is constantly in search of the new and consequently discards old goods that are still wholly intact, traveling from one place to another, loosing roots in old ties at the same time and abandoning habits.[3] Not only visitors to the institution are expected to develop this personality, but also the staff members. Especially for institutions for contemporary art, which are themselves flexible and uncertain about their future, well founded knowledge, education and experience are often not as important as a person's global presence and networking and their manager qualities. Which expectations are involved here? The requirements have changed, art institutions have to compete with business enterprises in the location and PR policies. The educational mission has become a consumption mission.

The example of the Guggenheim Museum most clearly demonstrates how the institution is conceived and staged by politicians and sponsors as a temple of consumption and how the global expansion of the institution is precisely calculated. It is no secret that art as a location factor played the largest role in the decision for Bilbao as the site for the spectacular Frank O. Gehry building of the Guggenheim Museum. The city that had been the largest industrial city in Spain until the end of the 19th century, had been deteriorating economically since the 1970s. For this reason, the Basque region developed a framework development plan, in which the Guggenheim assumed a central role. The plan worked: millions of tourists stream in every year, the region is economically successful once again, and the containment of

unemployment is largely attributed to the museum. This result has set a trend as the "Bilbao Effect" today. Another American mega-institution sets standards for the progressive corporatization of museums, the new MoMA, whose director Glen Lowry has expanded the board and the advisory committee of the museum with prosperous business directors, most of whom have no art-related background at all. At the same time, the curators have lost influence and responsibility by being subordinated to a newly established management level. The spatial expansions mostly benefit the merchandising areas on every floor, the restaurants, cafés and representative lobbies, which are tailored to fundraising events.[4] In this way, the MoMA has consistently internalized the illusory idea of a populist concept of the public sphere and the production of the consumerist subject in the logic of the institution.

However, a criticism of this form of globalized corporative institutionalism and its consumer audience is also being formulated: since the mid-nineties the programs of progressive public art galleries (Kunsthalle), art associations and other contemporary art institutions frequently mention that new public spheres need to be "produced", which is a counter-thesis to the old familiar concept of "reaching out for audiences". What is fundamental to the new concepts of the more progressive institutions is a radically different understanding of the public sphere and the structure of public spaces. With the concurrent trend toward more and more privatization, security, rivalry and exclusion in public spaces, a homogeneous democratic space, in which the most diverse interests could be lived and acted out harmoniously alongside one another, is unimaginable. Instead, the public sphere is considered as a space structured by diversity, in which different interests existing in parallel have a conflictual

mutual relationship.[5]
The recognition of dissonances as productive forces of public spaces means that the challenge facing public art institution (and also urban planning, politics, the media, all other public institutions and ultimately every single user of public spaces) consists of dealing with diversity and making existing conflicts productive. This is the task that the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) and the Rooseum in Malmö, for example, have devoted themselves to. The MACBA presumes that the public takes an active role as producer, from which new social and artistic structures can also emerge within civil society. The museum regards itself as an agent of this political practice, which simultaneously represents a platform for a repoliticization of art itself. At the same time, the MACBA proceeds diplomatically, as is absolutely necessary for an institution of its size, a public museum of contemporary art in a major city. Progressive political projects such as "Las Agencias", in which the museum was turned over to artists and social activism groups for various activities at the high point of the anti-globalization movement in 2001, or "Desacuerdos" ("The Adversaries"), about resistance movements in public space in Spain, are embedded in classical retrospective exhibitions of work, for example by Robert Frank or Francis Alys.
The Rooseum in Malmö, a regional public gallery in a mid-sized Swedish city, consistently pursued an approach of working with multiple public spheres under the direction of Charles Esche. With projects such as "Baltic Babel", in which self-organized artist groups from the Baltic countries participated, or the critical stocktaking exhibition "Whatever Happened to Social Democracy?", the Rooseum became the most progressive and perhaps most interesting institution in the Nordic countries. In Malmö itself, however, the Rooseum's activities ran into political opposition. The regional politicians defended their populistic

concept of the public sphere expressed in visitor numbers and not in the form of multiple, hybrid public spheres, sometimes including groups that do not conform to the ideals of bourgeois representation. In both examples, the diplomatic and the radical one, it is clear that the institutions involve art in democratic processes. In addition, by being mediatized through the institutions, art is able to introduce levels of desire into political concepts, as Lars Bang Larsen formulated it in a recently published article.[6] The notion of desire in this context is obviously tied to the introduction of a subjective perspective. In fact, the "economy of desire" represents, in my view, an essential factor, if one considers the production of a political sphere of art institutions. At the same time, however, I would contradict Deleuze/Guattari's exclusive definition of the subject as an economy of desire, meaning a purely libidinous orientation, and agree instead with Gayatri Spivak, who argues in the sense of necessarily asymmetrical relations between desire and interest.[7]

As curator for NIFCA (Nordic Institute for Contemporary Art), I have explored the theme of current changes in contemporary art institutions in a series of exhibitions, panel discussions, workshops and meetings. These were based on the aforementioned observation that, parallel to the increasing corporatization especially of museums and larger institutions, which has been taking place since the 1990s, new forms of more flexible institutions have formed in alliance with a critique. Although these new forms of institutions have arisen under very different conditions, contexts and intentions, they are working on the shared idea of devising alternatives to carrying out a populistic program. These new institutions have set themselves the task of not merely producing one exhibition with popular appeal after another, but rather of addressing very different subjects at multiple levels with the most

diverse specific offers and producing a diversity of public spheres. Whereas the populistic model of the policy of mass appeal follows the lowest common denominator, the more progressive art institutions seek to create a democratic place of polyvocality with specific events running in parallel, accepting the possibility of conflicts at the same time. I am especially interested in looking more closely at these more progressive models and in assessing the developments of these new possibilities, which frequently arise in a closer cooperation between artists and curators. How are the working conditions of these institutions formulated, how are critical potential and profile established and utilized, and how are the political reactions expressed? Is it possible to take stock of these models already? How is emancipatory work with art institutions formulated today, in which manner does it even exist?

The aim of the projects was to discuss and experimentally apply new models of institutional cooperations – utopian as well as realistic ones – at various levels and within the framework of various formats such as exhibitions, research projects, panel discussions, workshops and meetings. The project *Opacity. Current Considerations on Art Institutions and the Economy of Desire* represents a platform for an experimental institutional model, which takes research and analysis as a first step, followed by more visually oriented processes such as exhibitions, screenings, or fanzines. As research instruments we used not only traditional methods of accumulating facts and treating them, but also fiction and secondary strategies like appropriation. The artists (Kajsa Dahlberg, Danger Museum, Markus Degerman, Stephan Dillemuth, Gardar Eide Einarsson, Sofie Thorsen) and the participating institutions (NIFCA in Helsinki, INDEX in Stockholm, UKS in Oslo and the Secession in Vienna) were equally involved in workshops, an exhibition, panel discussions, a screening

and the production of a fanzine.
Close cooperation and exchange were also the basis for the project *Spaces of Conflict*, an *audio-visual, research-based essay on institutional spaces* by the Swedish artists Mike Bode and Staffan Schmidt, this time involving curators and directors from seven institutions in Berlin, Oslo, Copenhagen, Vilnius, Malmö and Helsinki, and art students from the academies in the same cities. The participating institutions provided the very different spatial conditions. What does it mean for a curator's work, if the exhibitions and other events take place in a representational former bank building from the 19th century like the National Museum of Contemporary Art, Design and Architecture in Oslo, in a former margarine factory like the Kunst-Werke in Berlin, in an art palace from the socialist era like the Contemporary Art Center in Vilnius, in a former turbine power plant like the Rooseum in Malmö, or in a neo-classicist museum building like the Kunsthalle Helsinki? Whereas the building, the physical location of the institution, seems to be the constant factor of institutional work, all the other institutional conditions are constantly changing, sometimes because of political changes as, for example, in the case of the situation following the change of government in Denmark, which caused radical changes in the structure, the influence, the autonomy, the legitimization and the working conditions of cultural institutions. It should be noted that almost all the institutions portrayed by Bode and Schmidt – Rooseum, Kunst-Werke, Museum for Contemporary Art in Oslo (today: National Museum for Contemporary Art, Architecture and Design), x-room in Copenhagen, and NIFCA itself – are currently undergoing a serious transformation, which requires a change of course on the part of policies ranging from total restructuring through personnel decisions and radical budget reductions all the way to the closure of the institution. It thus appears that these models have been bridled, regardless of whether

they are progressive attempts to integrate the structures of the institution in their programmatic work, a special interest museum for contemporary art or simply a niche-like way of anchoring the contemporary in the framework of a historically oriented institution. The tendency is clear: it is centralized superstructures that are being promoted, what Tone Hansen called "megamonstermuseums" in her study on the process of centralizing the state museum in Oslo.[8]

The task that remains for progressive institutions is to counter this tendency with emancipatory concepts, to present imaginative and desirous political concepts, and thus to prove that the "politics of pleasure" is not to be equated with the "politics of consumption".

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[1]Immanuel Wallerstein, "Demokratie, Kapitalismus und Systemveränderung", in: *Demokratie als unvollendeter Prozess*, Documenta11_Plattform 1, p. 113-130.

[2]This capitalist enterprise logic is augmented in Scandinavia by the social-democratic idea that every institution is supposed to be useful for the people, which means potentially for every single citizen.

[3]Richard Sennett, *Die Kultur des neuen Kapitalismus*, Berlin 2005. However, the book evinces the same problem that frequently occurs in Sennett's writing, namely that a suitable analysis of existing conditions tends to follow solution proposals based on hindsight. (Original English title: Richard Sennett, *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, Yale University Press 2005)

[4]Cf. Andrea Fraser, "A Museum is not a Business. It is Run in a Business-like Fashion", in: Nina Möntmann (Ed.), *Art and its Institutions*, London 2005.

[5]Chantal Mouffe, for instance, describes this space as an "agonistic public sphere"; see Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, London 2000.

[6]Lars Bang Larsen, "Statement on Art and Politics", in: *Frieze* 87 Nov./Dec. 2004, p. 87.

[7]Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak", in: Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Ed.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Urbana and Chicago 1998, p. 271.

[8]Tone Hansen works as Research Fellow on this theme at the Academy of Fine Arts in Oslo.