02 2004

Criticizing Institutions?

Katya Sander

During the period of my studies at the university as well as the art academy – through the early 1990s – institutional critique was something that had just reached the shores of the Danish art- and academic discourses. Some would probably argue that it still lingers there, in the margins, only no longer with the same exotic feeling of 'newness' to it, and thus already less fancy and hip to engage with. And they might be right. At least if we measure by so called 'street-credibility' in slang, or 'symbolic value', according to Bourdieu. Somehow it seems as if what was so quickly labeled 'institutional critique', never really found any fertile ground in the specific Danish or Scandinavian context – or maybe rather: They did it too fast, and too quickly became yet another label for yet another cultural trend and aesthetic genre, an (institutional) naming-practice which is so very effective in implying that – in this case – 'criticizing institutions' is only one more aesthetic strategy that has been appropriated by the institution and the market forces it follows (both symbolic as well as not).

However, I believe that many art workers who were (and still are) inspired by the analyzes of institutional practices that surfaced at a certain moment have meanwhile developed ways of using their knowledge and thoughts that are today not possible to label 'institutional critique', but never the less use more interesting and productive parts of analyses and strategies around logics of

institutionalization as a central vehicle for their existence as a voice in local discourses.

The reason I travel all the way back to the label 'institutional critique' is to be found in the lessons that had to be learned along with such labeling. First lesson was the question of local specificity: Simply to understand that even though most art-theory and critical discourses in Denmark were – and still are – imported from mainly the US (and also to some extend from Germany) this doesn't mean that the institutional mechanisms – or rather their workings and effects in a specific culture – are the same. Far from. With this lesson came of course another; namely that the mere power of the 'institution' is exactly that: The ability to assert the right to name / to norm. – Or more specifically in this case; that US-based art discourses of 'institutional critique' partly had their power in our context through exactly being able to take for granted that they were relevant as such for all art-institutions, also the very local ones we were taking part in.

Naturally, the modern art museum of the West is exactly that – 'modern' (and thus also' western') – because it first and foremost defines itself by the generic format of the white cube; the form that frames an understanding of one self – or of ones institutional 'self' – as *universal*. That this machine is also at work in Danish art museums as well as I guess most of the Western 'modern art museums', there can be little doubt about. And its main product; witnessing its family to other 'universalizing' (western) discourse-machines, and thereby legitimizing itself, is of course as effective as it needs to be in order to stay in power; to always represent and reproduce a 'norm'.

But while this generic blue-print for production of representational norms may appear quite similar from one western context to

another, the logics by which the normatization is taken on; consumed and digested, or used and abused in further discourses, varies quite drastically.

The ways in which a standard modern art museum is positioned in specific public discourses differs drastically form context to context. And thus, since I want to argue that the art-institution never only exists as itself, but always also through its relationship to its 'public', the art-institution as such becomes a drastically different kind of machine from context to context, even though its blue-print is authorized exactly because it appears so flawlessly generic. It is these contextually defined differences in institutional effect, which I think one has to focus on when discussing different models for art institutions and how such could work. But this doesn't mean that nothing can be said on a general level. I of course believe that there is a lot to learn and take further from each other, if we keep the parallel analysis of the specificity of a situation in mind.

The modern art museum that produces itself in a discourse in which it can understand itself as 'universal' also produce an audience (a public) that understands itself as 'universal'. But this inscription of the spectator into the kind of 'universality' produced at a modern art museum is possible to work against, within artistic practices as well as outside of the practice; in organizing politically.

In my talk I will give a couple of examples of institutional and organizational working methods, which I believe are interesting in this respect. Those are: Copenhagen Free University (Cph), Appendix (Cph), b_books/oe (Berlin), Kvinder på Værtshus (Cph) and finally – and a little bit different – UKK ('Young Artists and Art workers').

I have selected those as examples because I find them interesting in the way they negotiate their production of a public in each their specific context. They are interesting because they seem to me to have found / be struggling to find a way to address and produce an audience in public, but exactly as *not* universal. This could easily be understood as some kind of underground- or sub-cultural romanticism but it is not *only* that. Or it could be tempting just to call it 'subjective' or 'individual', but it is not just that either. (It is exactly *not* about neo-liberal institutionalizing 'individuality' or 'subjectivity', we have seen enough of that!) I want to see them as a third or fourth or fifth position; positions that maybe touch the traps above, but then at least do that in ways that produce more; exes, surplus. In this they become also something that of course doesn't exist, yet challenge us with its question.

The last example I will mention is the artists- and art workers organization called UKK which I am a proud member of and – together with many others – have been very involved in forming only 2 years ago. The organization differs from the above mentioned examples in the fact that it works for representing the interests of what we call "young artists and art workers" in the political system (which also includes the bigger art institutions, funding bodies, the press, radio & TV apart from of course influencing the actual decision makers, administrators and bureaucrats on all levels). As such, I would like to suggest UKK as a kind of meta-organization, or even –institutionalization, that seeks to constantly investigate and address the logics and mechanisms with which different art institutions produce themselves and their publics. This is my suggestion for a reading. The official mission statement is written on a more pragmatic note:

UKK - Mission Statement

UKK, Young Art Workers, is an organization for younger artists and art workers in Denmark. The organization was formed in the summer of 2002, as an outcome of the protests against the policies newly elected right wing government in the spring of 2002. Since gaining power in the November 2001 elections, the right wing government has targeted contemporary art among such areas as environmental protection, education, immigration and human rights for economic cut backs and politicalk restrictions. The cut backs directed at the arts sector particularly hit young and experimental art, as well as international exchanges and efforts. One of the reasons this was possible, even relatively easy, was due to the fact that no organisations spoke on the behalf of those working in this field. As such, UKK, was also formed in opposition to the existing artists associations and the royal artists guild and their conservative, elitist policies and agendas.

UKK thus have a dual aim; at once directed outward toward the political field and the media, and inwards towards the organization and structure of the art world and its institutions. UKK aims for a more dynamic and open field for contemporary arts, and is the only organization to include to groups of artworkers, artists as well as critics/curators in an effort to bridge the traditional gap between practice and theory, between production and mediation. The organization focuses on the work and working conditions of contemporay, younger art workers, with a delimitation of 15 years of professional life. As oppossed to other organizations, membership in UKK shall be gained through purely nominal rather than aesthetic grounds: anyone working professionally within contempoary art shall be accepted in order to represent the field in its broadest, rather than narrowest, elitist sense. UKK also

represent students at academies and universities. The organisation will work towards the following goals:

A more open and transparent structure in the Danish art system

The developement of an art system that priviliges the experimental, the expanded and international exchange

A broader and more enhanced debate on contemporay art and its placement, both on the art scene and in the general public sphere

More exhibitions of contemporary and experimental art in museums and public institutions

Equality between men and women in positions at institutions, as well as in collections and exhibitions in the institutions

Representation of UKK and public and ministerial committies and councils that pertains to contemporary art

The establishment of an Institute for Contemporary Art in Denmark, with equal focus on and funding for research, production and exhibition

The establishment of fixed rates and minimum wages for artits exhibiting at institutions and for frelance curators working for institiutions

A larger and fairer representation of contemporary art in mass media

The establishment of an unemployment fund and rate for artists