

# Institutional Stress. When Bureaucracy Replaces Art...

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Pablo Helguera, *Artoons*, 2010, Courtesy of the artist and Jorge Pinto Books, Inc.

By Max Rynänen

If you read a pile of old art journals you cannot but notice that art talk has changed a lot during the last two decades. Institutional matters have taken over. Not long ago, it was commonplace to debate only artists and their work. Now even mainstream art magazines publish critical notes on the role of the museums, the flood of biennales, and trendy political concepts like neo-liberalism.

People with major roles within the institutional framework have lately been making satirical statements about the role of art in the art world. David Franklin, the director of the Cleveland Museum of Art, told *ARTnews* in November 2010 that “some museums are

almost ashamed they collect art. They feel they should be restaurants and bookstores and places for weddings and special events. I'd love to get married in a museum, but you have to realize that's not the core business."<sup>1</sup>

The Scandinavian art journal *Kunstkritikk* reported in May on the apocalyptic rage of Nicolaus Schafhausen, still then the director of Witte de With, Center for Contemporary Art in Rotterdam, Holland: In "Schafhausen-Back to Exhibitions!" The star curator claims that the art world is today too discourse-driven. It is just about seminars, panels, scholarly conferences and talks.<sup>2</sup>

The art institution, and following that institutional talk, has a dominant role in the art world like never before. Critics used to be on the top of the hate lists of artists, but they have been overshadowed by new stress factors. At openings, we nag about art fairs, leading curators, crooked career paths and our overload of administration.

### **FROM 1968 TO THE TERROR OF EDUCATION**

In an essay touching upon the theme of anti-institutionalism, the Swedish philosopher Sven-Olov Wallenstein makes the point that since 1968, we haven't been able to be positive towards institutions. We have a lot of aspirations that we project on new contemporary art museums, but we are never satisfied with them.<sup>3</sup>

But, of course, classical modernists battled institution anxiety in the past in many ways. Picasso had so much contempt for the petty bourgeois Louvre that he stole statues from the museum just to get a feeling of revenge.<sup>4</sup> And our critical debates about whether museums should be 'temples' or 'theme parks' is more than a century old.<sup>5</sup>

Today it is the machinery of the institution and the flood of new practices that have invaded it that make it an issue. We have entered a new stage in the amount of institutional stress we have to face, and most talk, I believe, follows the fact that we have to fight more to be able to concentrate on art.

One example of a practice that overshadows art is education. We know the positive examples-biennials with great mediation programs and the way artists can make a living by giving workshops for children or elderly people in museums. Education departments have also brought new audiences into the art world.

But the hunger of this growing business seems to be insatiable, and I think we have to take a break and discuss where to draw the line. Many museums today decide whether or not they can do an exhibition based on the needs and judgments of their education department. Some art educators say that no choices about the art exhibited should ever be made without thinking about it from the point of view of art education.

At worst, political art gets depoliticized and obscure art gets simplified. The contemporary art museums we dreamed about have in many cases become sites where art is presented to the "woman of the crowd." In extreme cases, this can mean chasing away the professional audience and those who just want to meditate on art in peace.

Many artists feel that they are not really professionals by taking care of children or elderly people. And in many museums you really have to fight to keep educators out of your experience of art. You can forget theories of aesthetic experience when you hear a guide talking about the “exciting life of the artist” in the background, or when the pile of info for dummies overshadows the work of art itself.

I like to read my Dostoyevsky without explanations, and that’s the way I like to watch Buñuel’s movies. I prefer my art dry. And it is only in contemporary arts where I have to safeguard my relationship to works of art. A friend who does theatre said to me: “I have heard that art education has become a problem in contemporary art, and I hope we are not going to do the same with theatre.” We have a reputation!



Erik Sigerud, *Post Mortem*, 2009, oil and vinyl on canvas, 74.8” x 177.” Courtesy of the artist.

## **KAFKA IN THE ART WORLD**

Administration is, though, something we all have in common. It might have hit Europe more painfully than the U.S. following the Soviet-like bureaucracy of the European Union, but it seems that everywhere people in arts have to do more “paperwork” nowadays. As funding is more fragmented, there is more to plan and more to report on. And it is easier to make quality checks with the help of computer programs.

A colleague of mine who curated an enormous international biennial said that curating was hard work, but it was nothing compared to the amount of work on reports he had to do afterwards. Not just governmental organizations but even private ones have taken up the trend to “control” how their money is spent. The result is then presented on the webpages of the organization (which nobody reads). At many working places we have to report all of our working hours. In many cases this is fictional, as the information systems cannot take more than seven and a half hours per day. Pure Kafka!

Art school culture has changed a lot as well. There is less and less room for an experimental attitude, as you don’t get points for a good report on how the money of the school has been used. Teachers have to do more pedagogical studies and read university strategies (mantras). Only colleagues who I have met from Third World schools still feel they have enough time for substance.

Lately even students and free artists have been nagging about it. Students have to present plans on what kind of courses they are going to take and what kind of career plans they have. They have to evaluate courses, and they have to take part in pseudo-democratic processes, so that the school can, in the end, say that they have been listening to students as well. Student activists are kept happy, and they continue on their career track to become politicians. The process teaches them as well that bullshit administration is a part of their future life as artists.

Artists as producers of their own work have to work with bureaucracy, sometimes as much as (real) producers and curators. And in many projects the one who has administrative skills and tolerance to work with it gains a psychological advantage in decisions concerning the project as he has been doing more dirty work for making it possible.

### **NETWORKING, SELF-PROMOTION AND FALSE THEORY**

The list of institutional problems is really exhausting. We are tired of the self-promotion we all have to do more now than in the 1980s and 1990s. We have to network more-and not just in openings, but in social media as well. There isn't even a division of free time and work anymore, as Facebook and other programs keep you connected 24/7.

Van Gogh couldn't play the survival games of his own era, but today you don't have to be psychotic to not make it. You need to communicate your work verbally, you need to not show your frustration when curators visit your studio with their tight schedules, and as the power relations in the art world have changed, you cannot anymore even think about loose networks and anti-institutionalism as an "alternative." Watching my students, I cannot but say that one of the main career paths today consists of a load of networking in which private life gets blended with career and art gets blended with fake theory. In the end, if you win, you might find yourself on a panel at some shadow biennial "attacking" right-wing politicians and corporate industries-who will never even know that you existed. For some people this is easy-and even fun-but I constantly hear complaints about the institutional situation.

Theory has not helped us, even though it is a must for art schools. The more you teach theory, the "higher" the level of education is that you represent, even if you have no theoretical education. Theory seems to be a defense system, a bit like karate. You have to study it so you can defend what you are doing. Some people believe they have to read Derrida so that they will be able to read criticism.

Many colleagues accept you only if you talk in a theoretical manner. But don't think "theoretical" here means argumentation or refined thinking. Curators and artists who are not really interested in theory have to force themselves to write name-dropping texts in which they show how educated they are. Artists try to make sure that their work is understood the "right way," and when there is nothing else to say it is good to roll out the red carpet for Deleuze or Negri. So we get a lot of pseudo-theoretical texts full of fancy concepts-and once again we have a stress factor making it hard to concentrate on art.

## SURVIVAL

We shouldn't, of course, just nag about these issues. We might feel that it is hard to concentrate on art itself in today's overload of institutional pressure, but we might have to answer a question. As Walter Benjamin, in his classical essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936),<sup>6</sup> reflected upon what it means to experience both old and new (reproduced) works of art in the age of media culture, we can ask ourselves: Can our experience of art today be separated from the experience of the art institution? Our debates about the institution might actually be debates about what art is today.

At least our grand narratives about art's enemies have to change. We have to wake up. A lot of problems are actually produced by us, not mass culture or evil capitalists who hate art. And, in the end, about the end: Is this a new perverted form of the death of art that has been portrayed in the work of German philosophers since Hegel? Why not? But realizing the crisis already means that we are heading for a change. This meaning is famously inscribed in the Greek concept of "*krisis*." It referred to a decisive moment when change is possible, if not even already on the way.

So, put on your own safety mask first. Then, start to help the other passengers. And get back to business. Art-just do it!

## NOTES

1. See Litt, Steven. "Awakening a 'Sleeping Giant'. David Franklin takes the helm of the Cleveland Museum." *ARTnews* November 2010. 68-69.
2. See "Schafhausen - Back to Exhibitions!" in *Kunstkritikk*, May 24 2011. By Jon-Ove Steihaug. <<http://www.kunstkritikk.com/international-edition-en/schafhausen-%e2%80%93-back-to-exhibitions/?lang=en>>
3. Wallenstein, Sven-Olov. "Institutional Desires." In Nina Mörtman (ed.). *Art and Its Institutions. Current Conflicts, Critique and Collaborations*, London: NIFCA / Black Dog Publishing, 2006, 114-122.
4. Picasso stole statues together with the poet Apollinaire-and they were caught when the police suspected that they had stolen the Mona Lisa 1911. There is a load of material on this, but see e.g. R. A. Scotti's *Vanished Smile. The mysterious theft of Mona Lisa* for the story (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), which includes descriptions of the critical attitudes artists had towards institutions at that time.
5. The American history of this debate is told in a philosophically sensitive way in the beginning of Carol Duncan's *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*, London: Routledge, 1995.
6. Benjamin's classic can be found e.g. at <<http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/ge/benjamin.htm>>

**Tags:** art institutions, institutional stress

