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Take Me I'm Yours: Neoliberalising the Cultural Institution

By Anthony Davies

While talk of precariousness is rife in cultural and political forums, 'progressive' institutions do not always practice what they preach. Anthony Davies looks behind the scenes of 'radical reformism'

In March 2006, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Barcelona (MACBA), flagship 'progressive art institution', staged the second part of *Another Relationality*, a conference and workshop project examining the legacy of institutional critique and the new social and political functions of art. The event included presentations from sociologist Maurizio Lazzarato, critic-activist Brian Holmes and economist Antonella Corsani – all broadly associated with debates on the role of creativity, knowledge and subjectivity within contemporary capitalism.

[IMAGE]

Image: MCBA subvertisement by ctrl-i

Just prior to a conference workshop in which they had been invited to participate, local activist collective ctrl-i issued a public declaration of withdrawal, accusing the museum of complicity with the very neoliberal imperatives it purported to critique. On the surface at least, their statement – including the trenchant line 'Talking about precariousness in the McBa is like taking a nutrition seminar at McDonald's' – had the hallmarks of a typical struggle against institutionalisation. But there was one key difference: ctrl-i is partly made up of temp workers formerly employed by the museum and not, as might be expected, an unaligned or 'autonomous' body resisting co-optation. It was moreover their knowledge and critique of precarious labour conditions and cultural neoliberalisation in Barcelona that was to form the basis of their contribution. The collective had been born in direct response to an earlier MACBA event, *El Precariat Social Rebel*, where, under the auspices of activist network *The Chainworkers*, they spoke out against the museum's dubious employment practices and later gave up their jobs in circumstances that remain largely unclear.[1] While ctrl-i's unique status as temp workers and local activists may have prompted the invite from MACBA, it also gave the group licence to dramatise *Another Relationality's* underlying themes in an emphatic act of withdrawal.[2]

To understand the context for this signal act of protest on the part of a group of culture sector workers, and to give a material basis to the discussions on institutionalisation currently taking place in publications such as *Art Monthly* and *Mute*, we need first to look at the uneven process of neoliberal restructuring as it courses its way through cultural and educational institutions.[3] According to Marxist geographer David Harvey, neoliberalism's trademark rhetoric that human wellbeing is contingent on developing individual entrepreneurial freedoms – chiefly the freedom to operate in the market – should be contrasted with the unprecedented 'creative' destruction that accompanies neoliberal reform. In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Harvey describes how this process results in an erosion of existing social relations, ways of life and thought, as the market gradually penetrates and puts to work the 'common sense' way that many of us live in and engage with the world. The state's role becomes principally that of ensuring the proper functioning of markets, setting up institutional frameworks which ultimately guarantee the 'maintenance, reconstitution and restoration of elite class power'. It is difficult to track these developments across different regional and national contexts, however, and this is exacerbated by the multifaceted, hybrid and localised manner in which they unfold, another symptom/condition of the process Harvey terms 'uneven geographical development'.[4]

[IMAGE]

Image: subvertisement by ctrl-i

Where do state-funded cultural and educational institutions fit into all this? What role do they play? At a point where many have been set to work by capital in ever more 'innovative' (read: commercialised) ways, a host of contradictions and antagonisms have surfaced. While some now openly promote the liberating capacity of new revenue streams linked to consultancy, outsourcing, business incubation and enterprise activities, others seek out more tactical models of engagement, looking to new constituencies and standards of practice to offset the crisis of legitimation which opens up as institutions are subjected to neoliberal agendas.

An attempt to address some of these issues in the European cultural sector can be found in *European Cultural Policies 2015: A Report with Scenarios on the Future of Public Funding for Contemporary Art in Europe*.^[5] This publication acted as the cornerstone of the International Artist Studio Program in Sweden's (Iaspis) contribution to the Frieze Art Fair, 2005. Against the backdrop of an earlier rejected proposal to the Frieze Foundation, state-funded Iaspis decided to pursue a more general enquiry into the cultural and political questions opened up by their compromised participation in the fair, focusing specifically on its exemplary and problematic identity as a 'public-private partnership'.^[6] In collaboration with the European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies (eipcp) and London-based design group Åbåke, Iaspis went on to commission reports from eight local experts on key social, political and economic determinants of cultural policy in seven regions across the EU. The reports integrated hypothetical scenarios of what the cultural landscape might look like in 2015 as well as introductions by Iaspis director Maria Lind and eipcp director Gerald Raunig. These latter two texts illustrate the grand ambitions of the project: to influence – and possibly reform – European cultural policy, and to strengthen 'radical-reformist elements of the cultural-political discourse in Europe'.^[7]

[IMAGE]

Image: diagram by Nils Norman and Dismal Cartographics, November 2006

In spite – or rather, because – of its political ambitions, *European Cultural Policies 2015*'s focus on the meshing of the state, its institutional apparatus, and the market elides any significant debate on class power within art institutions themselves and across the commercial sectors with which they interact. This makes the underlying economic disparities and antagonisms associated with neoliberalism's specific mode of 'uneven development' impossible to gauge. It also obscures the interests of those whom the report's findings ultimately serve.

Along with the policy minutiae, however, we do get an insight into the inter-institutional faultlines opening up across Europe. The report's account of the breakdown of Frieze/Iaspis's earlier collaboration and the subsequent soul-searching undertaken by Iaspis director Maria Lind and her colleagues is symptomatic of such conflicts. 'Progressive' institutional voices, mostly those in the upper echelons (directors, key administrators and curators), in conjunction with a new type of defector academic/activist 'communication consultant to the prince' look for new operational models to open up a critical engagement with the institution's complicity in cultural neoliberalisation.^[8] Lind's introduction to 2015 registers Iaspis's discomfort regarding the 'collaboration' with Frieze while the report itself atones by disclosing the financial details of the project. It's a characteristic deflective move. Frieze Art Fair's enthusiastic adoption of corporate values, dramatically high turnover and audience figures, together with the generally porous membrane separating its commercial and non-commercial activities, become the anti-model of neoliberal institutional practice, the vanguard of the 'almost completely instrumentalised' cultural/art dystopia for which we are notionally all destined

in 2015.

The 2015 report contrasts this nightmare vision of neoliberal cultural lockdown with a wet dream of agile, socially responsible and responsive transnational infrastructures – something like eipcp’s ever-expanding network of ‘Co-organisers’, ‘Associated Partners’, etc.[9] Behind its critical reflections on cultural policy there lies a bid for future state funding. The report’s not so tacit conclusion is that the European Commission should reconsider its priorities and shift monies away from the big players and richer member states (read: UK plc., Frieze & Co.) and over towards ‘responsible actors’ (read: Iaspis/eipcp) and smaller self-organising networks.

This goes some way to explaining the absence of any debate in the report on wage and labour relations within art institutions themselves. It also throws up other questions. For instance, given the EU’s aim of promoting the transnational dissemination of culture as a catalyst for socio-economic development and social integration, and its funding of both Frieze and eipcp, which of the two operational models delivered the most ‘European Added Value’?[10] The introduction to 2015 threw up a series of binaries: Iaspis-eipcp versus Frieze Art Fair; public versus public-private partnership; self-organised versus instrumentalised; institutions acting as ‘responsible actors’ versus institutions as mere ‘facilitators’. However, these alternatives should not be read as divergent paths but as coexistent forms of neoliberalism, evolving at uneven rates and in different phases perhaps, but all moving in the same direction. Each leads towards the same future – one with a human face, the other without – as various institutional actors become the unacknowledged legislators of neoliberalism and work to pioneer a socially acceptable form of its hegemony.

[IMAGE]

Image: MACBA Barcelona

This process sees a proliferation of transnational infrastructures connecting art institutions up with self-organised (activist) networks. As a tendency it can be tracked back at least as far as the earlier institutional incorporation of activist strategies in the late 1990s-early 2000s with MACBA frequently being cited as one of the first institutions to spearhead this with their Direct Action as One of the Fine Arts workshop in 2000 and Las Agencias (The Agencies) in mid 2001.[11] However, the consolidation of left radical-reformist agendas and coalitions at the first European Social Forum in Florence in November 2002 provides the more obvious ideological blueprint for the type of ‘critical’ policy alternatives found in 2015. Around this time, eipcp also launched its ‘Republicart Manifesto’, setting the tone and operational parameters of a three-year, EU-funded programme of events, web essays and conferences. This hauled a range of micro-institutional programmes and discourses into its investigation of the ‘development of interventionist and activist practices of public art’. The manifesto also claimed to pose a corrective to the dialectical cul-de-sacs and ‘revolutionary pathos’ characterising ‘90s political art. It explicitly rejects ‘reforming a form of state’, but nevertheless lays out a road map that would later enable state-funded institutions to harness some of the provisional overlaps between their activities and those of social and political movements.[12]

Eipcp continues to function as the project leader in a transnational cartel of institutions and individuals, all of whom feed into its web portals Republicart (2002-05), Transform (2005-2008) and Translate (2005-), and back out, to conferences, symposia, exhibitions and workshops (see diagram). The network is now positioned at the institutional epicentre of a number of European cultural debates on progressive and radical reformist cultural strategies.

The phrase ‘progressive art institution’ for example can be tracked back to eipcp and, as a generalised catch-all, has proven itself particularly adaptable to the kind of concerted effort the network makes to generate a coherent theoretical framework. This project starts to take shape in the run up to the conference *Public Art Policies: Progressive Art Institutions in the Age of Dissolving Welfare States*, in 2004. An open discussion on web platform *Discordia* between the organisers, participants and other interested parties offers an insight into some of the general confusion, disputes and problems associated with the term ‘progressive’. According to eipcp’s Raunig, it should be read as ‘becoming’ not ‘being’ progressive:

this becoming progressive happens between the two poles of movement (micropolitical actions etc.) and institutions (political organisation, etc.). the abstract negation of one of these two poles would lead directly into myths of freedom (which I also suspect behind notions like ‘open cultures’ or ‘free networks’, especially if in connection to the art field) or reformist reductions.[13]

While key figures in the eipcp network continue to promote various modes of ‘non-dialectical’ engagement, any claims to new forms of resistance and political action should be tested by their effect on the core of the (art) institutions in question. If they simply serve to insulate and insure these neoliberal cultural nodes against attacks on their legitimacy or provide ideological cover for a process of economic restructuring, how ‘progressive’ are things becoming?

In addition to its pioneering approach to outsourcing, MACBA, according to its website, is economically supported by a foundation of thirty-eight sponsoring members and thirty-three founding businesses including multinational financial and consultancy services groups like Ernst and Young, Deloitte and scandal-hit Banco Bilbao Vizcaya Argentaria (BBVA).[14] As state-funded cultural and educational institutions pass through the eye of the neoliberal storm, it’s hardly surprising that a conspicuous self-reflexivity about their inner contradictions has become the stock in trade of progressives and radical reformers alike, broadcasting consciousness of the problems but holding their resolution in abeyance. With uneven rates of movement and development between states, regions and cities, the institutions in which these professionals work are now bogged down in an erratic process of ‘catch up’ as the state at once withdraws public sector support and economically mobilises culture and education.

This can be seen in the plethora of strategies for public sector reform and outsourcing. On the one hand, new models of efficiency and standards of assessment are introduced, on the other institutions are given the task of attracting inward investment, contributing to cultural tourism, urban regeneration and the Creative Industries. Cultural and educational institutions, then, are in the midst of various forms of neoliberal enclosure and the concomitant restructuring is seen by competing individuals, networks and agencies to offer openings for a range of agendas seeking to gain purchase on institutional structures/bureaucracies. Referring to the market for higher education and universities for example, academic Ned Rossiter has argued that,

just as NGOs and CSOs have filled the void created by the neoliberal state’s evacuation from the social, so too must organised networks seize upon the institutional persona of the ‘external provider’[15]

At the other end of the scale, the many and varied external providers linked to finance capital are also busy at work. At the inaugural conference of the British Venture Capital Association in September 2006, for example, companies referred to a ‘land grab’ as they rushed to secure stakes in the future output of university departments.[16] This activity is mirrored in the University of the Arts London’s (UAL) Innovation Centre and wholly owned subsidiary company UALVentures – part of a dozen or so

other schemes set up at UAL since 2002 to capitalise on staff and student enterprise initiatives, develop company spin-outs and build up IP portfolios.[17]

In response to this rapid proliferation of new enterprise zones in the cultural and educational sectors, some leading progressives advocate a rearguard challenge to neoliberalisation with the aid of what MACBA's head of public programmes, Jorge Ribalta, has called his 'trustees from below' (e.g. displaced, dispossessed and previously excluded constituencies).[18] With uncanny echoes of Blairite sociologist Anthony Giddens's earlier totem 'the state without enemies', these art institutions without enemies no longer recuperate resistance or institutionalise critique but claim to operate as its facilitators – partners in its very construction. And herein lies a principle contradiction: the content of the institution's discourse can be utterly inverted in the institutional form. While formally affirming the fight against precarious labour, for example, institutions continue to maintain high levels of labour insecurity among their workers. Ctrl-i's act of refusal brought this to wider attention, but it was already the subject of earlier critiques from activist network The Chainworkers at El Precariat Social Rebel (November 2003) and Spanish Indymedia activists at EuroMayDay Barcelona (2004). All these critiques actually occurred 'within' MACBA and, to varying degrees, at the behest of the museum itself (Indymedia Barcelona for example, is said to have grown out of one of its workshops). MACBA not only 'commands' criticism but lays down the terms and conditions in which it can take place. It does it by offering its facilities and expertise, by inviting the big international celebrity activists to further politicise their 'trustees', and generally help to integrate anti-capitalist and social movements into its programme. As Gerald Raunig puts it:

A productive game emerges here in the relationship between activists and institution, which is neither limited to a co-optation of the political by the institution, nor to a simple redistribution of resources from the progressive art institution to the political actions.[19]

This then begs the question whether, for all the autocritique conducted by institutional directors, curators and activists, for all the talk of transnational networks linking up radical reformist elements, what tangible 'progressive' change has occurred within art institutions? Or indeed, for all those on temporary, fixed term contracts, in Spanish and other European (non-art) contexts?[20] Are we just looking at institutions looking at institutions looking at institutions – churning self-reflexivity as they oversee the creation of the EU's socially conscious variant on UK/US neoliberalism.

If two earlier phases of institutional critique broadly located in the '70s and '90s have been integrated into cycles of legitimation and further disabled by the ongoing privatisation of culture and education, should we take these more recent state-funded institutionally led initiatives seriously as a 'third phase' as some have argued? Of all the interpretations put forward by eicpc 'correspondents' and associates at the 2005 conference *The Future of Institutional Critique* and in the first issue of the web journal *Transversal*, filmmaker Hito Steyerl's is perhaps the most plausible though by no means unproblematic.[21]. She notes the integration of cultural workers into the flexible, temporary and exploitative labour conditions ushered in by neoliberalisation and claims that there is a 'need for institutions which could cater to the new needs and desires that this constituency will create'.

It's necessary here, when talking about needs, desires and constituencies, to acknowledge class struggle in these new enterprise zones/progressive art institutions and maintain clear lines of antagonism in any proposed 'third phase' of institutional critique. As ctrl-i have shown, we could start by directly confronting in-house disparities and inequities and ask why radical reformers avoid debating ongoing and often intensified labour market segmentation (i.e. the differential between permanent and temporary workers) within their own 'exemplary' cultural and educational institutions? Why do those at the top of the institutional pile and their army of new consultants continue to promote self-reflexivity and claim to facilitate dissent while acting as a buttress to elite class power? The

question then is not so much whether 2015's call for the EU 'to invest in long-term basic funding for transnational infrastructures' should be met (eipcp's continued funding suggests that it has been, in their case) but the manner and extent to which these infrastructures function in the service of capital.

Editor's note

Anthony Davies' concluding question will be further explored in a forthcoming text for *Mute* on the neoliberalisation of education

Footnotes

[1] Email correspondence with ctrl-i, August 2006. According to ctrl-i's account of their relations with the museum's Temporary Employment Agency, Serveis Educatius Ciut'art, SL, some of those who had spoken out against the museum were removed from their contracted positions in the 'guided tour' programme and placed in other, less publicly engaged, roles. Within two months all had left the museum. As temporary workers none had recourse to claiming 'constructive' or unfair dismissal. In UK law constructive dismissal is where an employee is moved to resign due to their employer's behaviour (and this can range from the interpersonal, harassment etc., to the structural, where the nature or description of the job changes), see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constructive_dismissal. For an online account of ctrl-i 's relation to MACBA and their withdrawal letter see <http://www.metamute.org/en/node/7469> and i-manifest at http://sindominio.net/ctrl-i/invert_and_subvert.html

[2] The invitation to ctrl-i to participate in the Another Relationality (part 2) workshops was made by MACBA and Marcello Expósito on behalf of the now disbanded 'Faculty for Radical Aesthetics', an offshoot of the European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies (eipcp). See the call for applications, <https://lists.resist.ca/pipermail/aut-op-sy/2005-June/004311.html>

[3] This article is based on a text originally commissioned by Art Monthly, where debate on institutionalisation and so-called 'New Institutionalism' has been developed through Dave Beech's 'Institutionalisation For All', No. 294, March 2006; Peter Suchin's 'On Institutionalisation', No. 295, April 2006; Lisa Le Feuvre's 'The Institution Within', No. 297, June 2006 and Jakob Jakobsen's 'Self-Institutionalisation', No. 298, July-August 2006, as well as the conference Worlds Within Worlds: the Institutions of Art, July 2006: <http://www.artmonthly.co.uk/institutions.htm>

[4] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 87-119

[5] European Cultural Policies 2015: A Report with Scenarios on the Future of Public Funding for Contemporary Art in Europe was commissioned as part of Frieze Projects and distributed free of charge at the Frieze Art Fair in October 2005. The report is also available as a pdf-file at: <http://www.iaspis.com> and <http://www.eipcp.net>

[6] Maria Lind, introduction to 'European Cultural Policies 2015': The previous year Iaspis had an artists-commission project proposal rejected by Frieze Foundation. The Foundation is supported by Arts Council England and the Culture 2000 programme. The 2005 Frieze Projects were commissioned in association with Cartier and supported by Arts & Business and Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

[7] Gerald Raunig, '2015 [Introduction]', <http://eipcp.net/policies/2015/raunig/en>. For Maria Lind's introduction, see <http://eipcp.net/policies/2015/lind/en>

[8] Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant have identified such consultants' role in granting a veneer of legitimacy to projects of the new state and business nobility. Their prototypical example was Anthony Giddens, British sociologist and ideological architect of the Third Way. See Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, 'Neoliberal Newspeak: Notes on the New Planetary Vulgate', *Radical Philosophy*, 108, January 2001, http://www.radicalphilosophy.com/default.asp?channel_id=2187&editorial_id=9956

[9] They are listed in the 'cooperation' section of eipcp's website and stand at around 50 organisations as of March 2007, <http://eipcp.net/institute/cooperation/cooperation>

[10] 'European Added Value' is outlined in the 'Award Criteria' section of the European Commission, Culture 2000 Specifications document, http://ec.europa.eu/culture/eac/how_particip2000/pract_info/appel_2006_en.html

[11] See Discordia exchange on progressive institutions: 'more than one shining institution', <http://www.discordia.us/scoop/story/2004/2/10/191433/396.html> and Jorge Ribalta, 'Mediation and Construction of Publics. The MACBA Experience', April 2004, http://www.republicart.net/disc/institution/ribalta01_en.htm

[12] Republicart manifesto, September 2002, http://www.republicart.net/manifesto/manifesto_en.htm and eipcp 2002 intro, <http://eipcp.net/institute/reflectionzone/eipcp2001/en>

[13] See Discordia, <http://www.discordia.us/scoop/story/2004/2/10/191433/396.htm>

[14] According to the MACBA website the objective of the Foundation is to 'actively contribute to the creation and development of the Contemporary Art Museum through the growth of its permanent collection.' The MACBA Consortium on the other hand (which consists of two public administrations) contributes the resources to maintain the museum's basic functions. See MACBA Foundation http://www.macba.es/controller.php?p_action=show_page&pagina_id=24&inst_id=15175 and for BBVA see: 'A Widening Probe in Spain', *BusinessWeek Magazine*, 22 April, 2002

[15] Ned Rossiter, 'Organised Networks: Transdisciplinarity and New Institutional Forms', <http://transform.eipcp.net/correspondence/1144943951>

[16] 'Jon Boone, 'University Spin-Outs Turn the Heads of Venture Capitalists', *Financial Times*, September 28, 2006 and and venture capital firm Quester's commentary/report into 'Building University Spin-Outs: A VC's View on Three Key Ingredients to Success', October 2006 http://www.quester.co.uk/pdfs/Building_viable_university_spinouts.pdf

[17] The University of the Arts, London is at the forefront of this debate in the UK and in addition to the rapid growth of business incubators and enterprise initiatives it has recently set up Creative Capital-World City. This state funded initiative been developed in conjunction with a number of London based 'partner' universities (including Kings College London, London Business School and the School of Oriental and African Studies) to open up key world markets for the UK Creative Industries. See: http://www.arts.ac.uk/docs/Creative_Capital_-_World_City.pdf and <http://www.arts.ac.uk/business/about.htm>

[18] Jorge Ribalta, 'Mediation and Construction of Publics. The MACBA Experience', April 2004, http://www.republicart.net/disc/institution/ribalta01_en.htm

[19] Gerald Raunig, 'The Double Criticism of parrhesia. Answering the Question "What is a Progressive (Art) Institution?"',

http://www.republicart.net/disc/institution/raunig04_en.htm

[20] Spain accounts for 31 percent of temporary workers in Europe and has more temp workers than Italy, the UK, Belgium and Sweden combined. See Sebastian Royo, 'The European Union and Economic Reforms: The case of Spain', <http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/documentos/243.asp> An OECD survey from 2005 noted labour market segmentation between permanent workers protected by high severance payments and the growing army of temp workers with little employment stability as a 'harmful feature' affecting productivity growth. See: http://www.oecd.org/document/10/0,2340,en_33873108_33873806_34585738_1_1_1_1,00.html

[21] Debates on a third 'phase' or 'wave' of institutional critique can be found in Simon Sheikh's 'Notes on Institutional Critique', Hito Steyerl's 'Institution of Critique' and Gerald Raunig's 'Instituent Practices: Fleeing, Instituting, Transforming'. All can be found at <http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0106/raunig/en>

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