Many of the key independent curators of the 1990s are now running major European art centres. Their radical and inclusive approach to the function of the gallery has been coined ‘new institutionalism’.

If the rise of independent curating is one of the key stories of the art of the 1990s, attention has since shifted to the effects many of those independent curators have had on institutions. Since the Millennium a number of curators who in large part made their names and developed their practices outside institutions are now running serious, medium-sized centres of contemporary art in Europe. Between 1999 and 2002, for instance, Nicolaus Schafhausen took over Kunstverein Frankfurt, Maria Hlavajova took on BAK in Utrecht, Nicolas Bourriaud and Jérôme Sans became the founding directors of Palais de Tokyo, Vasif Kortun founded Platform Garanti Contemporary Art in Istanbul, and Catherine David, Charles Esche and Maria Lind took charge of Witte de With in Rotterdam, Rooseum in Malmo and Kunstverein München respectively. While most of these individuals had previously worked in institutions, often on a curatorial rather than directorial level, all were also known for their freelance work in the increasingly flexible terrain of art in the 1990s, whether curating Manifesta (Lind and Hlavajova) or the Istanbul Biennial (Kortun in 1993) or co-founding an idiosyncratic art space (in the UK, Lind at Salon 3 and Esche at The Modern Institute), a critical journal (Bourriaud’s Documents sur l’Art) or a critical and curatorial studies programme (Esche’s Protoacademy in Edinburgh). Besides guest curating, these individuals had developed singular voices as critics and public speakers, especially with regard to articulating curating’s expanded field. The recent shift in institutional thinking, a phenomenon that has begun going by the name of ‘new institutionalism’ – a term borrowed from economics and sociology – is a consequence of formerly independent (or quasi-independent) curators taking charge of a significant number of venues concentrated on a social democratic axis in north-central Europe: the Nordic countries, the Netherlands and Germany.

In the last year or two ‘new institutionalism’ has entered a second phase, with Schafhausen now directing Witte de With (Rotterdam) and the expiration of Bourriaud, Sans and Lind’s contracts in Paris and Munich respectively. Lind is back in Stockholm directing Iaspis (previously she curated Moderna Museet’s ‘Projekts’), while Søren Gramel and Katharina Schlieben, two of her former colleagues in Munich, now respectively direct and curate Kunstverein Graz and Shedhalle in Zurich – if its journal is anything to go by, the Shedhalle picked up where Kunstverein Munchen left off.

With Esche now at Van Abbe Museum in Eindhoven, can ‘experimental institutionalism’ (as he prefers to call it) begin to re-shape museum culture, with its far larger publics, operational machinery and systems of accountability, as it has to some extent at MACBA (Barcelona) under Manuel Borja-Villel? Or are collection-based institutions by nature resistant to the ‘new institutional’ values of fluidity, discursivity, participation and production?

One of the defining traits of ‘new institutions’ is that exhibitions no longer preside over other types of activity. In the conventional kunsthalle the exhibition is primary, the centre that other activities (catalogues, guides, tours and so on) support. The ‘new institution’ instead places equal emphasis on a range of other functions. BAK, for example, describes itself on its home page as a ‘platform dedicated to thinking, researching, producing, presenting and analysing contemporary art’. This results in a redistribution of its resources, expressed both spatially and temporally in terms of how institutions’ hardware (their buildings) and software (their schedules) are...
apportioned. Platform Garanti bears this out, acting ‘as a meeting point in the city between contemporary artists, curators and critics. The building contains an artist archive, research and lecture spaces, Istanbul Residency Program and, on street level, a gallery.’4 At institutions such as BAK and Platform, production and reception co-exist with presentation on equal terms.

Many ‘new institutions’ run international residency schemes for artists, curators and critics under the same roof as their exhibition spaces, their guests being active during their stay in lectures, screenings, workshops, conferences and so on. Production may also take less conventional forms: CAC, Arteleku and Rooseum have all produced in-house television as art work and curatorial medium (CACTV, Arteleku TV and Superflex’s Superchannel respectively). Production doesn’t necessarily happen prior to and remote from presentation; it happens alongside or within it. Reception, similarly, refutes the white cube ideal of the individual viewer’s inaudible monologue, and is instead dialogic and participatory. Discussion events are rarely at the service of exhibitions at ‘new institutions’; either they tend to take the form of autonomous programming streams, or else exhibitions themselves take a highly dialogic mode, giving rise to new curatorial hybrids. ‘New institutions’ are deeply interested in education in its widest sense: learning consists of equal exchanges among a peer group in which the ambitious level of discussion is not compromised. This contrasts with government-directed, top-down models of education prevalent in American and British art institutions, much of which is aimed at children with a view to supplementing, or compensating for the failings of, the state school system. Compared with conventional museum education, the flat-line mutual learning systems artists and curators develop in some ‘new institutions’ are equivalent to the anti-psychiatry movement of the 1960s associated with the work of R.D. Laing and Félix Guattari.

The end of the exhibition’s hegemony within the multifunctional institution is also signalled by the abandonment of catalogues. Many ‘new institutions’ publish journals that bring together the strands of their programmes within a common interpretative frame or act as separate platforms for a parallel exploration of ideas through interviews and commissioned essays. ‘New institutional’ journals include Kunstverein München’s Drucksache, Shedhalle’s Zeitung, CAC Vilnius’ Interviu, CAC Bretigny’s L’Ed, Arteleku’s Zehar and Kiasma’s Kiasma. Not being fixed to a particular site, journals enable venues to communicate with a second, remote audience that in some cases is more receptive than their local constituency.

Of these, KM’s Gesammelte Drucksachen/Collected Newsletters 2002–2004 was the most ambitious, running to over 500 pages. As a resource on ‘new institutional’ theory and practice it is unmatched. Unlike the average kunsthalle leaflet, everything in the Drucksachen is enmeshed, making it difficult to distinguish one type of activity from another. Assistance arrives at the back of the publication, where there is a table dividing the programme into five ‘formats’, running the full three years: Exhibitions/Video Screenings (‘It is Hard to Touch the Real’)/Retrospective/Dispositive Workshop/Sputnik Projects. Time, the fourth dimension, was foregrounded at the Kunstverein, as it has been in experimental exhibitions of the 1990s, such as ‘Cities on the Move’ by Hou Hanru and Hans Ulrich Obrist, which evolved and mutated over time and continents. Drucksache editorials speak of wanting to work at different speeds, resisting the stop/go cycles of exhibition-centric programming, which begin each time with a blank slate: its five simultaneous ‘formats’ varied in duration from an evening to over a year. Christine Borland’s retrospective there was spread over time rather than space. Instead of showing the eight projects at once in as many rooms (which the Kunstverein couldn’t accommodate), the eight ‘stations’ were spread over 14 months in various parts of the building. One of the Kunstverein’s most distinctive innovations was the appointment of 14 ‘sputniks’ (travelling companions): artists, curators and writers who influenced its development in unprescribed ways, for example, by redesigning the lobby, curating an exhibition, devising a symposium or intervening in its communications system. The ‘sputniks’ crossed the divides between all of KM’s formats, blurring differences between staff and audience, staff and artist, artist and audience, the public face of an institution and its back-stage.
Kunstverein München’s self-reflexivity, and the extent to which its curatorial team theorized what it was doing, marked it out from other new institutions, with the exception of Esche’s Rooseum, although the latter’s equally political and prolific writing on institutionalism has different intellectual co-ordinates. At times a kind of institutional aesthetics seemed to emerge from KM’s auto-institutional critique, the institution threatening to become the focus of its own activities: ‘It does take some time for this type of programming to be discernible’, Grammel, Lind and Tessa Praun wrote in the editorial to the second Drucksache in the autumn of 2002. ‘Only after a while does a picture appear […] All these formats are intended to develop and from that to overlap, to complement, and to interact with each other, as threads in a loom.’ Shedhalle went one step further, describing its programme as a ‘dynamic cluster-like structure’ in the first issue of Zeitung (2004). ‘The modules alternate and cross, reflect and reciprocally comment on each other’, an image that evokes Deleuze and Guattari’s celebrated rhizome – a favourite curatorial conceit – or an anonymous abstract sculpture. The danger is that the institution becomes a kind of Gesamtkunstwerk ultimately authored not by artists but by curators, a charge Daniel Buren first levelled at Harald Szeemann and Documenta 5, which Szeemann directed, in 1972.

In some senses ‘new institutionalism’ represents the absorption of institutional critique as theorized and practised by artists since the 1970s. Seen this way, it is institutional critique practiced from the inside, exposing and opposing the ideological and disciplinary structures through which art in institutions comes to be mediated. But to most artists of the 1970s the idea of an institutional critique being practised by institutions themselves would have been oxymoronic: institutional critique, by definition, was something conducted from the outside (often literally so: artists closed galleries, wrapped them, plastered paper over their façades and so on). This mythical outside, which assumed that the institutional lay in buildings not discourse, led to a negative dialectic that essentially left art institutions unchanged, the white cube serving as a foil for critical installations. Vanguard artists of the 1970s abandoned the high Modernist doctrine of medium-specificity, but discipline-specificity remained mostly unchallenged.

‘New institutionalism’, and much recent art, side-steps the problem of the white cube altogether. If white-walled rooms are the site for exhibitions one week, a recording studio or political workshop the next, then it is no longer the container that defines the contents as art, but the contents that determine the identity of the container. In this, ‘new institutionalism’ has more in common with Liam Gillick, Philippe Parreno, Rirkrit Tiravanija and other artists associated with Bourriaud’s Relational Aesthetics, with whom new institutions have collaborated repeatedly, than with most institutional critique. When exhibitions evoke or function as factory assembly lines, film sets or fully functioning apartments, they cause the institutions they’re in to lose definition. For ‘The Trial of Pol Pot’ (1998) Gillick and Parreno invited a number of artists to hold conversations at Le Consortium (Dijon) with whomever they liked from any intellectual field. The venue was neither obviously open nor closed. What was it that visitors stepped into? The kunsthalle, one suspects, failed to convert this series of informal but exclusive transdisciplinary conversations into a ready-made, or an exhibition of works of art. Instead, the institution probably mutated under its influence, losing its prefix ‘art’ in the process, becoming part of a far larger institutional field.

Institutional reflection tends to be productive now, curators working hand-in-hand with artists, the shared assumption being that institutional identity is up for grabs. Artists’ space in institutions is no longer restricted to exhibition spaces: Gillick designed Frankfurter Kunstverein’s logo and the coloured suspended ceiling in its top floor gallery, for example, and Apolonija Sustersic designed Kunstverein München’s multi-functional lobby space; Rooseum’s ‘Future Archive’ is determined by artists it works with, whereas CAC Vilnius invites artists to intervene within its ‘Info Lab’. These fanciful names for libraries and archival facilities signal, performatively, the dynamic role knowledge production plays in these institutions. The artist-as-researcher is a privileged figure in new institutions; crowded with monitors, reading material, tables and chairs, exhibitions, at a glance, can look like unidentifiable classrooms worked by obsessives.

Artists’ groups and interdisciplinary collectives play a key part in the programmes of new institutions, particularly those of Esche and Lind; many of them make knowledge-sharing the
cornerstone of their collaboration (e.g., Nomads and Residents, 16 Beaver, The School of Missing Studies, Copenhagen Free University). Usually political, sometimes activist, well networked at a local and international level, collaborative as opposed to hierarchical, self-organized rather than instrumentalized, flexible and quick on their feet, in many respects artists’ collectives hold up a mirror to new institutional desires. Their inclusion in new institutional programmes ideally results in zones of relative autonomy within the institution, the collectives operating according to their own internal patterns, the institutions serving as their hosts. The most politicized new institutions aspire to a similar condition of collective autonomy writ large. Many see their experiments as logical responses to the most pressing socio-political issues of the day: the shrinking welfare state, the erosion of the social bond, the privatization of public space, the global hegemony of neo-liberal economics and so on. For Esche the project of ‘new institutionalism’ is nothing short of resisting the ‘totality of global capitalism’.

It’s hardly surprising that new institutions tend to be concentrated around traditional social democracies. It’s there, especially in Sweden (still the prototype social democracy), that belief in the transformative potential of public institutions remains strongest, despite recent set-backs. The new institution, coinciding with art becoming more politicized and transdisciplinary, is sometimes seen as a kind of compensatory public space, an ‘oasis of openness’ or ‘forum of possibility’, in Esche’s hopeful words, where ‘things can be imagined otherwise’. The dissolution of the homogeneous public sphere of Enlightenment (as theorized by Jürgen Habermas), could, after all, represent an opportunity: ‘new institutionalism’ may be losing the bourgeois public whose values museums have represented for two centuries, but it may in time find a substitute for it in the form of competing publics in the plural, an ‘agonistic pluralism’ of adversaries (rather than enemies) that, according to Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, is a prerequisite of radical democracy. If ‘new institutionalism’ cannot create these publics, it will remain an ambitious prototype, as hermetically sealed as the white cube its shrugs off. Without these publics it won’t begin impacting on the real social forces beyond its walls.

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1 Several ‘new institutional’ precedents in the 1990s include Künstlerhaus Stuttgart (under Ute Meta Bauer, then Schafhausen), Arteleku in San Sebastián (Santi Eraso), CAC in Vilnius (Kestutis Kuizinas, along with Deimantas Narcevicius and Raimundas Malasauskas) and Shedhalle in Zurich (Ursula Biemann, among many others).

2 Contributions to the developing discourse on ‘new institutionalism’ include: Verksted #1, 2003: New Institutionalism (Office for Contemporary Art Norway), ed. Jonas Ekeberg; ‘Institution Squared’ at Kiasma (Helsinki) in 2003, curated by Jens Hoffmann and produced by NIFCA; Claire Doherty, ‘The Institution is Dead! Long Live the Institution! Contemporary Art and New Institutionalism’, engage 15, 2004; and, most recently, Art and its Institutions, ed. Nina Möntmann, Black Dog Publishing, London, 2006. ‘Institution Squared’ took the form of an exhibition in which ten institutions were invited to represent themselves, which they tended to do through artists’ commissions. The discourse was generated in an accompanying conference co-organized by Möntmann.

3 http://www.bak-utrecht.nl
4 http://www.platform.garanti.com
6 In 2001 Esche wrote that he wanted art institutions to become ‘part community center, part laboratory and part academy, with less need for the established showroom function’, an image that evokes the kinds of spaces Relational artists produce in their exhibitions. http://www.rooseum.se
7 For a critical account of the incorporation of artists’ groups in ‘new institutional’ programmes see Rebecca Gordon-Nesbitt, ‘Harnessing the Means of Production’, Verksted #1