

Establishing the Continuously Unfinished The Institution as an Artistic Medium

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Abstract

When realising themselves as dispositifs, no matter whether they extend into a physical or nonphysical dimension, artistic works are motivated by urgency.

The engagement of artists with and within institutions increased within the last century, yet they may well not only be applicants or founders of institutional formats, but utilise these formats and the processes establishing them as an artistic strategy, creating a dispositif to meet an urgency framed by a specific historical context. This paper discusses the properties of institutions, which are indeed exemplary for dispositifs and are permitting their appliance as artistic media.

Keywords

Artistic Medium, Institution, Art, Discursive Territory, Performative Act, Artistic Strategy, Processuality, Experimentation, Dispositive.

Introduction

Now, the term ‘art’ might be starting to describe that space in society for experimentation, questioning and discovery that religion, science and philosophy have occupied sporadically in former times. It has become an active space rather than one of passive observation. (Esche, 2004)

The relation between art and its pertinent institutions has been differentially addressed and recent years were marked by growing interest in the forms and formations of their reciproque inducement.

Constituting Institutions

However close one might be to the multifaceted theoretical discussions, the term institution is one way or the other seething with alleged meaning. Even though those might be their most obvious; most typical characteristics, institutions exceed the walled facilities embedding organisational structures and containing a variety of purpose-bound material objects and tools. Indeed they only then come into being when replenishing their physicalspatial configuration with constitutional

processes steeped in social engagements, set objectives and shared visions, potentially interfering with personal imaginaries, which are just as much a part of them. Characterised by being manifest yet elusive constructs of a material and immaterial nature, institutions represent most prominently what Foucault (1978) signified as a dispositif and hence “the said as much as the unsaid”. Inheriting a concrete aim, and pursuing a strategic function motivated by the quest to meet an urgency, they establish and reproduce themselves through the continuity of recurring institutionalising and institutionalised processes virtually until the moment they fall apart, which is specifically the moment when the reproduction of these processes ceases. Institutions are based on their processuality and consequently the interruption of this processuality inevitably leads to the end of the system, when all that remains are its hollowed physical ruins.

The Artistic Dispositif in Medium and Form

Media denote those forms of transmission, which ascertain that certain elements are perceived while at the same time the transferential form is eclipsed by exactly those elements. Giancarlo Corsi and Elena Esposito (2007) refute anything from being form or medium per se, but always either medium with regard to a form establishing itself, or form establishing itself within a lower-level medium. Art realises the connection between consciousness and communication without necessarily having to resort to language. It challenges our perception in different ways than those achieved by other media, since its perceivable forms are subject to a different order. At the same time it produces within this proprietary structure and order nothing but communication, since their dispositifs hold selected information that has to be disclosed and processed in order to be able to serve their intrinsic function. Art hence is to be categorised as its own communication

system and makes use of certain media whilst being medium itself, no matter if its transmission form takes a physical shape or an immaterial one, and this applies to any art form even to those claiming to exclusively consist of ideas.

Institutions exhibit every necessary characteristic to be both form and medium, designed to serve a communicational function and constituted by communication. They are regulating effects of the relation of discursive and non-discursive formations and are meeting at the specific historical time of their existence, which is exactly what defines them as a dispositif as Foucault (1978) described it. It may reversely be concluded that institutions therefore hold the potential to pursue the urgency of establishing a discursive formation and therefore consciously design them to be experimental communicational media relying on and constituted by dialogue and participation.

In her essay *The institution is dead! Long live the institution! Contemporary Art and New Institutionalism*, Claire Dorothy emphasises the importance of “a dominant strand of contemporary art practice – namely that which employs dialogue and participation to produce event or process-based works rather than objects for passive consumption”. Utilising the institution as an artistic medium allows to embrace the inherent mortality of process-based art by being vigorously impermanent, focusing on highly temporal outbursts of artistic energy and supporting a practise that isn’t aiming to produce finalised objects but emphasises the discursive dimension of realising art.

As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1976) express it in their work *Rhizome*, art imitates nature with its own methods, bringing to a good end what nature is not or no more capable of. Utilising the institution as an artistic strategy, as material and immaterial medium, realises itself as a repetitive but ever changing performative act. Analogous to Deleuze and Guattari’s presumption this performative act imitates certain appearances of not natural but traditional institutional frameworks and processes and disposes simulacra subverting its original by playing the same field but under different rules, thus possibly bringing to a good end what those originals are not or no more capable of.

The act of constituting and running such a construct can, when withdrawing from a definition of art founded on the ontology of the picture, be interpreted as an intentional part of artistic creation. At a time where there

is no artistic production so subversive that it can not be capitalised the urge to retrieve to other artistic strategies increases, presupposing that artistic work shall be more than just an arrangement with the art market. A potential approach of this concept is focusing on the creation of situations and experiences while neglecting the general appearance of what is considered as being art and while possibly neglecting external interpretation altogether and maybe even going further and instrumentalising just that.

This space of possibility allows to undermine the axioms and principles of art perceived as such based on its aesthetics or the context it is presented in. While traditional art forms need to establish an aura of originality and productivity inevitable to create the desired lines in an artist’s CV, artistic strategies that are radically process based while not even presenting themselves in the seemingly appropriate context of a museum, a gallery, a theater or something similarly art connotated, render themselves incapable of participating at what commonly is perceived as art and its market, and might find themselves excluded from being defined as art altogether. Yet this very strategy inherits asubversiveness of other quality and utilises creative elements, which don’t necessitate to lean to the absurd yet so transparent system that has established itself as art. The intention of this approach however is not to negate art, but to realise it, to make daily life into a creative, continuously delirious experience and within this very process be an artist.

The purpose of art was defined within the work of Immanuel Kant (1790) as providing more inspiration for thought than can be grasped with language – in expressing something unnameable. By perception art is able to penetrate consciousness as a transformed experience, making use of perception as an instrument. Accordingly, the function of art may be located in the incorporation of something intrinsically incommunicable into communication. So while institutional critique most certainly can be communicated by other means of communication as proven prominently by a large number of theorists, another layer, one of artistic expression and thinking is likely only to unfold on other levels.

Universities as institutions of truth and sustainability are by nature hesitant to include ambiguity or temporality in their practices and are hence designed to fail in recognising that these are essential characteristics of art and what is commonly called artistic research. The continuous process of deconstructing and rethinking

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strategies, frameworks, audiences and formats of art, allows alternative initiatives to map out the discourse territory that art can be, whilst in this very process potentially being art themselves.

Conclusion

By consciously creating an institution that neither disciplines nor controls the exhibition, as terminologically defined by Michel Serres (1994), but one that embraces it, therefore allowing for heterogeneous connections, a socially informed form of network can be created that is opposed to traditional institutional frameworks and their rigidity or even finiteness, as described by Gilles Deleuze (1992), who wrote:

[E]veryone knows that these institutions are finished, whatever the length of their expiration periods. It's only a matter of administering their last rites and of keeping people employed until the installation of the new forces knocking at the door.

This creation of an institution embracing the exhibition, creating regulating effects which are effectively allowing irregularities and for a daily life as a creative, continuously delirious experience by employing institutional characteristics as a medium, lives up to a dream all artists share according to Dan Graham (2006), who said "All artists are alike. They dream of doing something that's more social, more collaborative, more real than art."

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