

Preface

The essays collected in this volume were selected from Transform, a three-year (2005-8) research project of the European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies (eipcp). Following up on the eipcp's previous Republicart project (2002-5), Transform supported a wide range of activities, research and exchanges focused on investigating political and artistic practices of 'institutional critique'. These included exhibitions, conferences and the publication of the web journal *transversal*, in which all of the following essays appeared.

For the Transform project, artists, activists, writers, theorists and researchers were encouraged to interrogate the history of the relations between 'institutions' and 'critique' and to consider the present and future possibilities for the theory and practice of institutional critique along three related but still distinct lines of inquiry. These lines were sketched as follows at the beginning of the project, in the summer of 2005:

1. The line of art production. The thesis here is that following the two phases of institutional critique in the 1970s and 1990s, now a new phase of critique is emerging, which goes beyond the two earlier phases, particularly as a combination of social critique, institutional critique and self-critique.
2. The line of art institutions. Here questions will be raised about the development of radical positions taken by critical art institutions, not only against the background that open, socially critical art associations, museums and initiatives are increasingly under pressure, partly from authoritarian repressive cultural policies, partly

from neo-liberal populist cultural policies. Beyond this defensive figure and the question of counter-strategies, new forms of the organization of critical art institutions are to be reflected on.

3. The line of the relationship of institution and critique as movement: at this most general level the question of the mutual interrelationship of institution and movement, machines and state apparatuses, is to be addressed, and how this relationship can be made productive in the sense of emancipatory policies and beyond the abrupt demarcation between the two poles.

From the beginning of the Transform project, it was clear that ‘institutional critique’ has long been an established stream of artistic practices with, now, well over three decades of history and development behind it. From its now almost mythical origins, this stream has given rise to transversal practices that cannot be classified as purely or exclusively ‘artistic’. The institutional critique of the 1960s and 70s formed a loose, barely coherent nexus that can only be understood within the context of micro and macro-political developments before and around 1968. Accordingly, the Transform project has oscillated over the last three years between the three lines sketched at the outset and the fields and practices from which they can hardly be separated. At the same time, a movement became discernible – even if not a rigidly linear one – from the major concerns of the first to the second and finally the third line of inquiry.

I. What is Institutional Critique?

The timeliness of the project quickly became apparent. Although it was conceived in 2004, its concrete beginnings in September 2005 coincided with a wave of renewed interest in institutional critique within the field of art itself – an interest confirmed by a series of symposia, publications and themed issues of art journals and magazines. These debates, which included diverse perspectives on the genealogy of institutional critique and on the operations of its canonization, are fully reflected in the first of twelve Transform issues of the web journal *transversal*, under the title ‘Do You Remember Institutional Critique?’ (January 2006). What appears in retrospect as the ‘first wave’ of institutional critique was initiated in the 1960s and 70s by artists such as Michael Asher, Robert Smithson, Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke and Marcel Broodthaers, among

others. They investigated the conditions of the museum and art field, aiming to oppose, subvert or break out of rigid institutional frameworks. In the late 1980s and 90s, in a changed context, these practices were developed into diverse artistic projects by new protagonists like Renee Green, Christian Philipp Müller, Fred Wilson and Andrea Fraser. To the economic and political discourse of their predecessors, the practices of this ‘second generation’ added a growing awareness of the forms of subjectivity and the modes of its formation. Second wave practices continued however to circulate under the name of institutional critique.

The process by which these first two waves of institutional critique have become a recognized part of art history was not without controversy and debate. Still, the canonization of these practices proceeds on a terrain that is quite orderly, operates by clear rules and borders, and is characterized by a certain amount of depoliticization and self-reference. However, our thesis concerning a ‘third phase’ of institutional critique provoked some very different interpretations among the participants of the Transform project. Some of the authors in this book focus on art institutions themselves, insofar as these are emerging as the new and paradoxical agents of institutional critique. Others seek to analyze the ‘extradisciplinary investigations’ undertaken by contemporary artist-activists and to reflect on what some see as a new artistic internationalism developing in conjunction with political activism. And while the attention of the mainstream art world has moved on from the debates about institutional critique, the question of the character of, what we have called, ‘instituent practices’ remains especially relevant for the actors in the overlapping fields of art and politics. Without over-determining the concept of ‘instituent practices’, we can say that it refers to strategies and initiated processes that in some respects take their bearings from traditions of institutional critique, even as in other respects they go beyond anything recognizable in the movement now canonized as part of art history. As the texts in this volume show, this tendency towards new activist and instituent practices is one direction in which practitioners and theorists are actively attempting to renew and reinvent institutional critique under difficult contemporary conditions.

II. Institutions of Exodus

The second line of inquiry inescapably had to pass through a reflection on the pressure of economic and administrative logics bearing down on all institutions in the cultural field, including those with which the eipcp has collaborated in realizing the Transform project. The eipcp's own position as 'project institution' within the paradoxes of a relative and critical autonomy created a self-reflexive debate on the future of critical institutions as such. In fact, the very idea of a 'project institution' is glaringly contradictory. For if the concept of 'institution' implies a desire for long-term duration, continuity and security, the concept of 'project' by contrast implies limited duration and the negative effects, such as precarization and insecurity, associated with it. Accordingly, one issue of *transversal* took on the tasks of reflecting on the conditions that make critical institutions possible and of seeking to specify the modes of action for politicizing these conditions, fractures and contradictions under the title 'Progressive Institutions' (April 2007).

The questions that begin to emerge at this point are of course not limited to institutions of the cultural field: they concern the conditions for critical and resistant institutions generally. Various recent approaches in philosophy and political theory, including those advanced by Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Antonio Negri and Paolo Virno, among others, as well as by some authors in the present volume, have undertaken to develop a 'non-dialectical' concept of resistance and critique, one seeking above all to establish a different conceptualization of contradiction, negation and reaction. The proposals for this conceptual development extend from the various figures of 'flight' (nomadism, desertion, destitution, withdrawal and treason) to differing concepts of 'exodus'. As thought by the authors in this volume, exodus is not a naïve exit 'out of every kind of institution', but refers rather to the deliberations and actualizations of 'institutions of exodus'.

III. Instituent Practices and Monster Institutions

Over the course of the project, the third line of inquiry brought the relations between social movements and their institutions to the foreground. In play here are the marked degradation of representative democracy in Europe, the frustrations and processes of internal transformation to be seen in the alter-globalization movement following September 11 and the so-called 'war on terror', as well as increasing

social marginalization and misery seen by many as an effect of national and transnational institutions. In any case, the third line helped to clarify as a concrete question the problem that became central to the debates generated by the project: which form of institutions and instituting do contemporary social movements need?

For answers to questions of this kind, two concepts became most important for the project: ‘instituent practices’ and ‘monster institutions’. Deriving from Antonio Negri’s concept of ‘constituent power’, understood as a permanent process of *constitution*, *instituent* practices thwart the logics of institutionalization; they invent new forms of instituting and continuously link these instituting events. Against this background, the concept of ‘instituent practices’ marks the site of a productive tension between a new articulation of critique and the attempt to arrive at a notion of ‘instituting’ after traditional understandings of institutions have begun to break down and mutate. When we speak of an ‘instituent practice’, this actualization of the future in a present becoming is not the opposite of institution in the way that utopia, for instance, is the opposite of bad reality. Nor is it to be understood simply in the way that Antonio Negri’s concept pair ‘constituent power/constituted power’ is conceptualized, necessarily in relation to being instituted or constituted power. Rather, ‘instituent practice’ as a process and concatenation of instituent events means an absolute concept exceeding mere opposition to institutions: it does not oppose the institution, but it does flee from institutionalization and structuralization.

But while fleeing, ‘instituent practice’ searches for a weapon. Introducing monsters into existing institutions, it gives birth to new forms of institutions, monster institutions. Deliberations of such a kind led, by the end of the project, to a collaboration with the Spanish Universidad Nómada on an issue of *transversal* entitled ‘Monster Institutions’ (May 2008). The essays in it reflect on the possibilities for new forms of institutionality in conjunction with social movements and with a clear focus on the new generation of social centers in Europe. From this perspective it is also possible to reverse the movement described above: the transversal quality of artistic institutional critique does not only challenge and thwart the borders of the field of art; the strategies and specific competencies of art can also be deployed to spur on a general reflection on the problems of institutions, the predicaments of critique and the openings for new ‘instituent practices’.